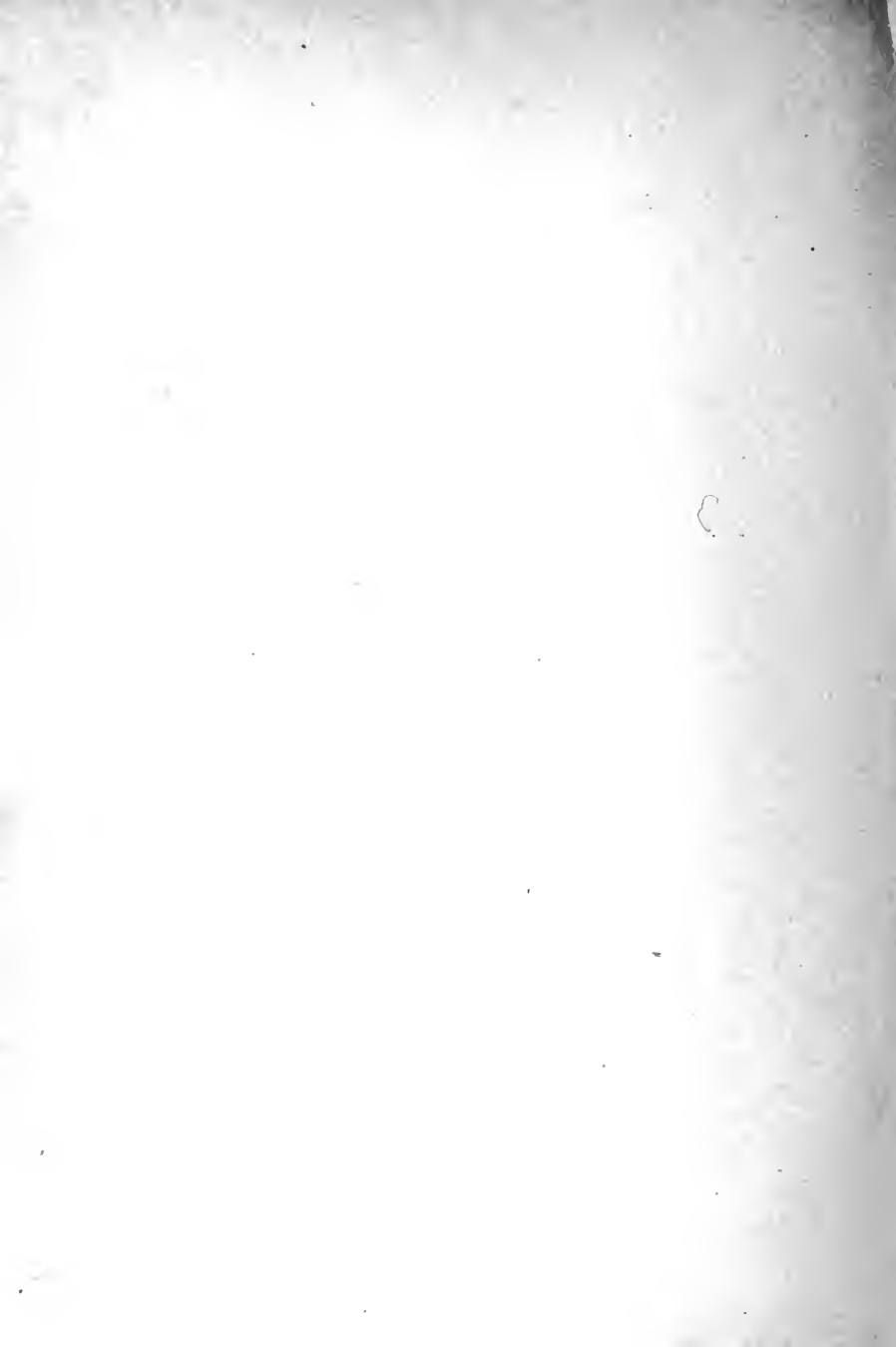


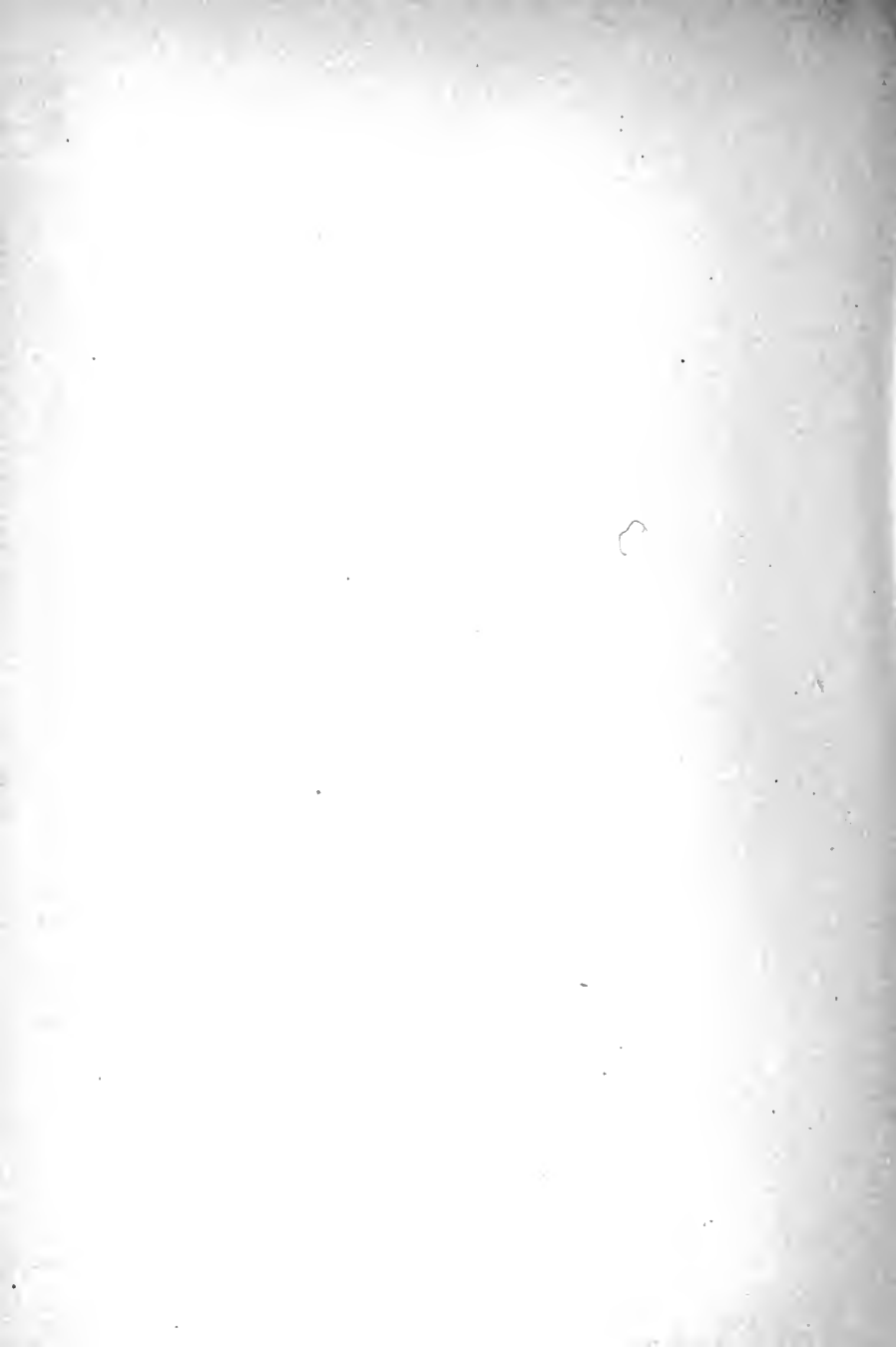


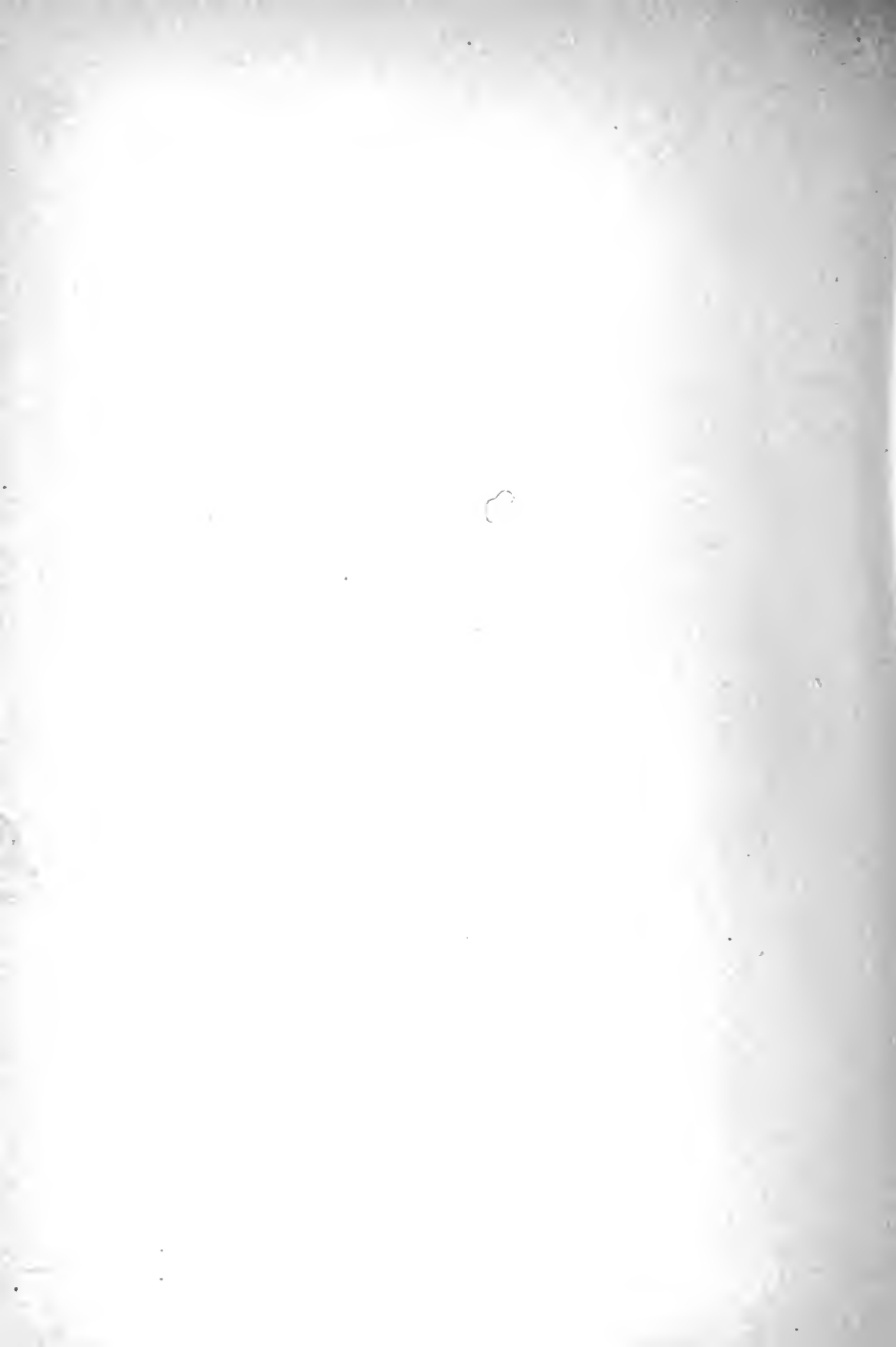
*THE
PRIZE
CUP.*



2595

17





THE PRIZE CUP

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



FRED MELVERTON LEAVES GID KETTERELL IN POSSESSION. (SEE PAGE 5.)

THE PRIZE CUP

BY—

J. T. TROWBRIDGE



Illustrated



NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1896

Copyright, 1895, 1896,
By THE CENTURY Co.

Copyright, 1896, by
J. T. TROWBRIDGE

All rights reserved

To
Edith Gentilia



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I GID KETTERELL'S CHARGE	1
II GIDEON AT HOME	7
III THE BOY WITH THE LAWN-SPRINKLER	12
IV MIDGET AND HIS CHAMPION	17
V AT THE PARSONAGE	24
VI "IT'S DEAD AGAINST THE RULES"	29
VII "SHOW ME THAT CUP!"	34
VIII THE PHOEBE'S NEST	42
IX THE TWO BICYCLE-RIDERS	50
X "STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN IN THIS HOUSE!"	57
XI "WHERE'S THAT CUP?"	65
XII GID'S ENTANGLEMENT	71
XIII GID LOSES HIS SITUATION	77
XIV MIDGET AND HIS FRIENDS	84
XV TRACY TRIUMPHANT	93
XVI TRACY GETS A "CLUE"	98
XVII GIDEON MEETS HIS FOE	106
XVIII OSK ORDWAY'S LITTLE FINGER	114

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX TRACY LISLE AND DORD OLIVER	120
XX FOLLOWING UP THE "CLUE"	131
XXI TRACY'S TELEGRAM	141
XXII GRAN'SIR PUDGWICK	147
XXIII THE OLD PAINT SHOP	157
XXIV OSK OFFERS TO ASSIST IN THE SEARCH	163
XXV HOW OSK ASSISTED	170
XXVI TEACHING THE DUMB TO SPEAK	179
XXVII AN AMAZING DISCOVERY	187
XXVIII A FAMILY COUNCIL	192
XXIX A MERRY PORCH PARTY	198
XXX GID KETTERELL CONFESSES	204
XXXI OSK IN COURT	214
XXXII "HIS 'BETTERMOST' COAT"	222
XXXIII WHO KEPT THE CUP	231

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FRED MELVERTON LEAVES GID KETTERELL IN POSSESSION	}	<i>Frontispiece</i>	PAGE
"‘THE CUP IS GONE!’"			63
"GID MOVED SULLENLY AWAY"			81
"FRED CROSSED THE BROOK AND CAUGHT HIM UP IN HIS ARMS"			87
"‘WHY, WHAT IS IT, TRACE?’ ASKED IDA LISLE"			99
"‘THEY ’RE TALKING ABOUT ME,’ HE MUTTERED"			111
"‘COME, DORD,’ SAID TRACY. ‘SPEAK RIGHT OUT’"			125
"HE LIFTED HIS TATTERED STRAW HAT"			149
OSK ASSISTS IN THE SEARCH			173
MIDGET REVEALS A SECRET			189
"‘THE THING IN THE POCKET WAS THIS’"			228



THE PRIZE CUP



THE PRIZE CUP



CHAPTER I

GID KETTERELL'S CHARGE



ON the outskirts of the village a little brook came gurgling down from the hills, gossiping among boulders and loitering in pools, light-stepping and blithe as a school-girl. It lingered a long while under a cool bridge, where its sandy channel was crossed by the village street, then went tripping and singing onward to the river, less than a quarter of a mile away.

Just above the bridge and a little back from the street, with only the brook and its shady banks between them, were two as pleasant rural homes as you will find anywhere in a day's drive among New England suburbs. The one on the left (as you looked over at them from the bridge) was the old parsonage: a plain, three-gabled white house, with

a broad porch, a pretty garden of shrubbery and fruit-trees, a grassy front yard, and a background of wooded hillsides. This had been the home of the best beloved minister the parish had ever had, until his death two or three years before; it was still occupied by his widow, Mrs. Lisle, and their three children, and the present minister, a young bachelor, boarded with her.

The residence on the right (you are still looking from the bridge) was more modern and much more pretentious. It was painted in soft contrasting buff and brown colors; it had imposing piazzas, bay windows and turrets, and large plate-glass panes, through which, when the Melvertons were at home and the house was open, you had charming glimpses of rich draperies.

But it was often closed in summer. Why anybody should wish to leave so lovely a country-home in the loveliest season of the year was a mystery to many people. But Mrs. Melverton (she also was a widow) thought a change desirable for her children and especially for herself; and punctually on the fifth day of July of every year (the boys stayed for the boat-races on the Fourth) the house was shut up, and the family went off to spend a few weeks at the seaside.

Again this year, on the forenoon of the fifth, a wagon-load of family trunks was sent off early to be forwarded by rail, accompanied by the second son and two servants, who were to open the sea-side cottage. Mrs. Melverton departed soon after, in her own carriage, with the younger children, while Fred, the oldest son, was left to lock up the house and follow on his bicycle.

Fred had gone through the upper chambers, and at last stood before the sideboard in the dining-room, looking intently at a gold-lined silver goblet held in his hand: a beautiful prize which he had won in a race on the river the day before. It bore an engraved inscription commemorating the event, with a blank left for the winner's name.

"I ought to have had this sent to the engraver's, after bringing it home to show to the family," he said to himself; "or I should have packed it for the beach. I don't like to take it on my safety for an eighteen-mile run."

Perceiving a movement behind him, he turned and saw a boy, about sixteen years old, standing in the open door that led into the back entry. This was Gideon Ketterell (commonly called Gid), who was to be left in charge of the house, and to whom the young master had been giving instruc-

tions as to the care of it. Fred had not intended to exhibit the cup, and he was about to slip it quietly out of sight, when, reflecting that Gideon had probably noticed it in his hand, he concluded it would be better to take the boy a little into his confidence.

"Have you seen this, Gid?" he asked, holding it up in the light that came through the lace draperies of a window the blinds of which were still open.

"I saw it when it was presented on the boat-house float yesterday," the boy replied, approaching, as it was extended for his inspection. "The fellows all envied you then, I tell you!" he exclaimed, with a grin of bashful admiration. "Splendid, ain't it?"

"It will do," said young Melverton, with quiet satisfaction. "You can go now. I'll meet you outside."

He did n't care to be seen locking the cup in the sideboard drawer. Yet the boy might have observed what was done with it if he had had the curiosity to turn in the dim entry, and look back through the half-open door. That Gid Ketterell was not altogether lacking in that very human trait will be shown in the course of our story.

The young master presently went out by the front door, taking the key with him, while Gid made his exit by a rear door, walked around the house, and met him at the foot of the piazza steps.

"Well, Gideon," Fred Melverton said, standing beside his shining wheel,—a fine athletic figure, in his dark-gray bicycle cap and suit,—“you have your key, and I have mine, and now I am off. You think you understand everything I have told you?”

“I guess so,” Gideon replied earnestly.

In a few minutes he would be left in a position of responsibility and advantage to which he had looked forward with anxious joy and pride; and now, at the last moment, he felt his heart beat with repressed excitement.

He had a good-natured face, a short nose with uptilted nostrils, which invited you provokingly to look into them, a weak nether lip, and slouching manners,—all in singular contrast with the clear-cut features and resolute mien of the trim young prize-winner who stood before him.

“—If I don't forget,” the boy added, feeling the other's keen blue eyes upon him.

“You *must n't* forget. One thing particularly. You're a good boy, Gideon, as your mother says,

if you only keep free from bad influences. There's a certain class of boys that must n't come about this place while you are here. I don't mean such boys as Tracy Lisle; the more you see of young fellows like him the better."

"But he does n't care to see much of me," said Gideon, with a sheepish hanging of the head.

"I'm afraid that's more your fault than his," Fred Melverton replied. "It is because you see too much of the other class of boys. I mean those that take Oscar Ordway for a leader. Oscar, especially, you are to steer clear of. Have nothing whatever to say to him if he comes about the place. I suppose it is hardly necessary I should charge you to let nobody into the house unless he brings an order from my mother or me."

"Of course I should know enough for that," Gideon replied, with a foggy sort of smile playing about his irresolute mouth.

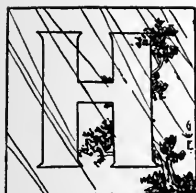
"Of course!" the young proprietor repeated. "Good-by!"

And, with a farewell wave of the hand, he remounted his wheel, and sped swiftly away. The boy's face brightened.

"I'm master now," he said aloud; "and I've got a soft snap!"

CHAPTER II

GIDEON AT HOME



E said that to himself two or three times on his way home to dinner, he said it to boys he met in the village, and he said it to his mother, whom he found hanging clothes on a line in the back yard.

His father also overheard the remark as he sat on a bench by the shed door, smoking his pipe, with his feet on a box; but it was n't meant for him. "Old man Ketterell" did n't count for much in his own household.

The mother was a woman-of-all-work who was very favorably regarded in the village for her excellent washing and ironing and scrubbing, for her stout frame and her equally stout integrity, and for her tireless energy in supporting her family of four children, as well as the husband and father, who (as she herself declared, from bitter knowledge of the fact) was "too shifless to breathe." She was

of Irish parentage; and it was thought that Ketterell, who came of a good American family, sunk pretty low in the social scale when he married her. But now people wondered how low he would have sunk if she had n't (so to speak) kept his nose above water.

He got the nickname of "old man" Ketterell before he was forty, by which time he had contentedly settled down into a state of shameless dependence upon her industry. He was always "waiting for a job"; while jobs were always waiting for her — sometimes weeks ahead. She had red arms, greenish eyes, and tawny hair combed straight back over her head and down her neck.

The greenish eyes gave Gideon a contemptuous flash as he came bragging into the yard.

"A snap, is it?" she cried, stooping for a clothespin. "That 's your notion of exerting yourself to gain an honest living, as it has been your father's notion before you!"

Old man Ketterell took his pipe from his mouth with a scowling grimace, as if minded to answer the taunt, but merely changed the position of his legs on the box, sighed resignedly, and put his pipe back again. Mrs. Ketterell usually governed her domestic realm with exemplary patience and

benevolence; but when there were signs of these fine qualities becoming overstrained, it was the part of wisdom (as the easy-going old man used to say) "to stand from under."

"A mighty poor notion it is!" she went on, pinning a wet garment to the sagging line, "—the worst possible way to take advantage of a chance that has come to you as this one has. Hold up that pail of clo'es-pins for me, will you? Don't be so tender of your own precious back, when you see me tugging and straining as I am now."

Gideon obeyed meekly.

"You are to have five dollars a week, without an employer's eyes to keep ye straight," she continued. "You can do much, or you can do little, according to your conscience: make an honest job of it, earn your wages, and be gaining a good character into the bargain; or you can make a snap of it, slight your work, and begin investing your youth in the rotten bank your father has been putting his capital into all his life, with the results you know."

Gideon cast a glance over the pan of clothespins in the direction of his easy-going parent, who, I regret to say, gave him an indulgent wink.

"But let me tell you one thing most emphatically!" she added, standing with a wet and wrinkled

skirt half unfolded on her hands. "If you misbehave in the matters the Melvertons have intrusted you with, out of the pure kindness of their hearts, and their respect for your hard-working parent,—everybody knows which parent that is!—if you fool away your chance, or come out of it with a bad name, I promise you such a whaling as you have n't enjoyed the blessing of for many a day!"

Gideon looked hard at the clothes-pins, and waited for the squall to blow over. She resumed:

"I'm minded to administer it to you now, at the outset, to make sure of your excellent conduct. There's nothing under the broad canopy so wholesome and improving to you as a smart walloping. It corrects your bad tendencies, and just fills you up with goodness for a month or two. It's a sort of discipline that would work well, too, in another case I might mention; for I can see him nodding and winking at you now, through his everlasting pipe smoke!"

Old man Ketterell stopped signaling instantly, and looked discreetly serious; there being perhaps some grounds for the popular belief that the strong-armed washerwoman could handle her husband as a cat tosses a mouse, and that she had been known to do it at times of extreme provocation.

"What do you say for yourself—you son of your father, every inch of you?" she demanded, poising the last of the clothes-pins.

"Of course I'm going to do my best," said Gideon, as if he meant it; and no doubt he did mean it sincerely at the moment, with the green fire of his mother's menacing eyes flashing down upon him.

Her manner changed in an instant; the stern features softened.

"That's what I've been waiting for you to say; and now if you'll pledge yourself to keep that good resolution, you may come in to dinner; for I see Lucy has got the potatoes on the table. The deserving and the undeserving will sit down together," she added, with a grim look at her husband.

CHAPTER III

THE BOY WITH THE LAWN-SPRINKLER



THE Melverton house had been closed three days, or opened only to let in air and sunshine in fine weather, according to the instructions Mr. Fred had given the boy who was left in charge. It was fine weather on the eighth,—almost too fine,—for the early part of July that year was dry. The place that morning presented a pleasing picture; the brook plashed in the little ravine, under the rhododendrons that bordered it on the Melverton side; the jets of a fountain on the edge of the lawn glittered in the sun; birds flitted about among the firs and larches and fruit-trees; and a single human figure added life to the scene.

This was a coatless boy, in a broad-brimmed straw hat, with a pair of dark suspenders forming a large letter X on the back of his shirt—a homely boy with a short nose, uptilted at an angle of about

forty-five degrees, and a loose under lip—in short, the boy we know. Not so handsome as some boys you may have seen; yet it must be owned that he gave a very pretty effect to the landscape, standing there on the edge of the lawn, before the banks of flower-beds in front of the house, holding the end of a hose which stretched its wavy length away across the green grass and graveled walk like a preposterously long and slim black snake.

The head of the snake in the boy's hand was a lawn-sprinkler, which gave it a prodigious crest of silver spray, out-glittering the fountain itself, forming, indeed, a sort of movable fountain, that danced about on the lawn, and among the flowers and shrubs, at the boy's own sweet will.

He seemed to find pleasure in his task, if ever a boy did. He sent the showers wherever his fancy led, now on the flower-beds, and now on the lawn, even occasionally on the fountain itself, to watch the curiously mingling jets; watering a good deal in the most convenient places, and neglecting too much some that could n't be reached without more effort than he cared to put forth. Sometimes he amused himself by making rainbow flashes in the spray, tossing it in the sunshine, regardless where it fell, even when it came down upon his own

head. And all the while he indulged his boyish dreams.

He dreamed, for one thing, that the hose was long enough so that he could carry his sprinkler to the river, and make a mimic rain that might delude the fish into biting, as they are thought to do on wet days better than in fine weather.

He also dreamed that he was no longer the son of old man Ketterell and the village washerwoman, but one of the Melverton boys, and that this fine estate was his rightful home.

He would have liked very well to be Fred or Frank Melverton for a little while, but perhaps not all the time. He would have liked their guns and their bicycles, and some of their money to spend (or rather a good deal of it), and, instead of having them "boss" him, he would have much preferred to boss them. But as to the rest—the hard studying (Fred was in the Institute of Technology, and Frank was preparing for Harvard), the cultivated manners, and the kind of company they kept—he was n't at all sure but that he might just as well remain Gid Ketterell, with his own boy life unbothered by books, and with his own free-and-easy companions.

Steady occupation, or restraint of any sort, did

not suit his constitution. But he now had a job about as much to his mind as anything in the way of employment could well be. He had been at it three days, and had n't got sick of it yet. Besides having a general care of the house, and watering the garden, he was to feed the cat and the chickens, run the lawn-mower, and keep the flower-beds free from weeds, with other light duties usually performed by the coachman, now absent with the family. Gid had not yet got so far as hoeing and pulling weeds, which, being the most disagreeable of his tasks, he naturally postponed as long as possible.

Having sprinkled some things that needed water, and several others that did n't, he was not the kind of boy to miss a chance of giving the cat a shower-bath. Puss darted away, shaking herself, to his immense delight.

"It did n't take her long to get her money's worth!" was his comment on this pleasant incident.

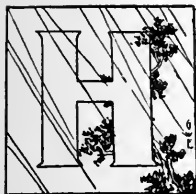
He bethought him next to look into the trees for a bird's nest, which could n't escape so easily. A nest of young birds with a pair of distressed old ones hovering and chirping about to defend them, would have been especially inviting. He found

only a purple finch's nest, from which the young finches had fortunately flown; he was showering that, and imagining what sport it would be if the little half-fledged bodies were still there to receive the drenching (though Gid was not an exceptionally bad-hearted boy), when a chance for livelier mischief presented itself.

"There's Midget!" he said to himself, turning his back, and pretending not to notice a child straying up through the shrubbery from the brookside. "I'll give him Hail Columby!"

CHAPTER IV

MIDGET AND HIS CHAMPION



E was a little fellow, not more than five or six years old, and small for his years. He wore a short frock like a girl's, that showed beneath it his bare brown legs and feet; he was bareheaded, and he had fine flaxen hair, the light locks of which strayed over his tanned forehead as the bushes brushed it, or the wind blew.

It was as bright and happy a face at that moment as the morning sun shone upon. Yet there was something strange about it, you could hardly have told what: there was something strange in all the looks and movements of this wandering elf. If he had been the only being in the world, he could n't have seemed more lonely or more deeply absorbed in his own little life. He drew down the drooping rhododendron branches as if he loved them, and held the glossy leaves to his cheeks and lips. And when he came to the flower-beds, he clasped his

tiny hands as he bent over the blooms in mute rapture, touching and smelling.

He did not hear Gideon Ketterell, who came up behind him; he did not even hear the pattering of the hose-shower on the borders and walks. Alas! for more than three years those little ears had never heard a sound, neither the songs of birds nor the falling of the summer rain, nor the voice of any other child, of brother or sister, nor the words of endearment his mother bestowed upon him all the more passionately for his sad bereavement. He had forgotten to prattle, or even to call her by the dearest of all names.

His mother was the Widow Lisle, whose home was across the brook. This was her youngest child, Laurence, pet-named Laurie, but oftenest called Midget on account of his odd ways, small size, and restless and sometimes mischievous activity. He was an object of love and wonder and pity to almost everybody, only a few of the rudest boys making fun of his infirmity. Gid, I regret to record, was one of these.

Midget had plucked a sprig of heliotrope, and was holding it to his face in an ecstasy of pleasure, when Gid, who had been watching for a favorable moment, turned the hose full upon him. In a mo-

ment the child was completely drenched. But the result was n't just what Gideon had anticipated. Midget did not run away as the cat did; he did not scream—the helpless child had long since lost the power to scream. He turned, and with the water dripping from his hair and face and arms, gave Gid a look of such astonishment and distress, that it must have touched even that careless nature, for Gid immediately pointed the sprinkler away.

“You should n't be picking the flowers. I am here to take care of 'em,” Gid said, by way of excusing himself to himself, rather than to the child, who could n't hear.

Having winked the water from his eyes, the child kept them fixed on Gid with an intense frowning gaze, full of unutterable grief and reproach, marvelous in one so young, at the same time backing slowly away as from an object of dread. So he reached the rhododendrons, into which he darted and disappeared.

“What did the little imp look at me that way for?” Gid muttered, with an uncomfortable feeling, as he began to reflect seriously on what he had done. “The wetting won't do him any harm, though his mother may n't see it in that light. Anyhow, he won't come in here again very soon.”

Gid was mistaken, however, about that. He was watering the flower-beds profusely, and trying to forget the unpleasant incident, when a rustling of the rhododendrons and a sound of footsteps attracted his attention; and there, emerging from the bushes, was Midget, dragging forward by the coat-skirt a boy of about Gid's own age and size.

It was Tracy Lisle, the little deaf-mute's elder brother.

"Hello, Trace!" said Gideon carelessly, as he proceeded with his sprinkling.

Master Lisle advanced with stern looks and determined steps to the graveled walk where Gid stood. He wore a somewhat soiled suit of gray, and a soft felt hat with the rim turned up in front, giving him a somewhat aggressive aspect, and he walked straight up to Master Ketterell. His blue eyes sparkled, and his naturally ruddy face had a flush of excitement in it, as he demanded:

"Gid Ketterell, what did you wet my little brother for?"

"Oh, him?" Gid replied, with a laugh. "I was watering when he came in the way of my sprinkler. That's all there is about that."

"Gid Ketterell," the older brother replied, "if every true word you speak was a bushel of cher-

ries on that tree, there would n't be enough to climb for. He got his wetting in a different way."

"How do you know?" Gid retorted, with sullen defiance.

"He says so."

"Says so? I never knew the little monkey could speak." And Gid giggled.

"Little monkey? — call my brother little monkey?" Tracy cried out, in blazing indignation.

"You must n't dispute my word then," said Gid, starting back in a belligerent attitude, and pointing his hose aside. "Need n't double your fist and look so savage! Don't you strike me, Trace Lisle!"

"I 've no notion of striking you, much as you deserve it," Tracy replied. "My fist doubled itself, as any honest fist would, knowing what you 've done, and then hearing you deny it, and call him such a name as that; a child that can't even speak in self-defense!"

"Oh! I thought he *could* speak!" Gid jeered, still watering his flowers, while he stood ready to dodge a blow.

"He can't speak a word, and you know it. For all that, he can tell more truth in half a minute than you are apt to tell in all day. He ran home

and told just how he got his drenching. Now he 'll tell you."

So saying, Tracy made a gesture to the child, who stood watching the disputants as eagerly and as intelligently as if he had understood every word. A brief communication by signs passed between the brothers; Midget ran to the edge of the flower-bed, pretended to pick a sprig of heliotrope and hold it to his nose, and then suddenly to feel the shower from Gid's sprinkler splash over him; acting the little pantomime with an amusing liveliness at which Gid had to laugh.

"He did n't come in the way of your sprinkler; the sprinkler came in his way," said Tracy.

"I guess that 's about the size of it," Gid answered. "He was hooking flowers; I am here to protect the flowers, and I thought I 'd give him a lesson."

"*He* hooking flowers? I 'd like to hear you say that to one of the Melvertons!" Tracy exclaimed. "They encourage him to come in and pick all the flowers he wants. They 're as kind to him as if he was their own child, and they 're always sending bouquets to my mother. The idea of your protecting the flowers from any one of us, and especially from him!" And he made a motion for Midget to

help himself to the heliotropes, which the child did, casting up at Gideon a glance of gleeful triumph.

"*You* can take the responsibility," Gid muttered, discomfited and surly. "The Melvertons did n't say anything to *me* about letting neighbors come in and help themselves to things. I supposed I was here to prevent just that."

"Suppose you are," cried Tracy. "They expected you to use some reason and decency in guarding the premises. A good house-dog would do that much."

"Now look here!" broke forth young Ketterell, losing his temper. "I 've heard enough of your insults. Get off these grounds, or I 'll give *you* a soaking; and don't you ever set foot here again as long as I am in charge."

"You won't always be in charge," Tracy retorted scornfully. "You can give me a soaking if you think it's wise to do so, but you 'll wish you had n't. You don't know the Melvertons, and they don't know you. There 'll be an end of your insolence to neighbors and meanness to little children on this place, soon as ever they find you out."

And, taking Midget by the hand, he walked off very deliberately, leaving Gideon stifled with feelings he did n't deem it safe to indulge.

CHAPTER V

AT THE PARSONAGE



DESCENDING into the cool ravine, Tracy caught the child up in his arms, and was crossing the brook with him, when he met their mother coming down the opposite slope.

"I heard high words," she said, with a look of pain in her gentle face, "and I am so sorry!"

"I 'm sorry, too," said Tracy. "I hate to get into a row, especially with a fellow like Gid Ketterell; but it was just as Laurie told us. He was picking a flower when Gid came up behind and showered him. I let him understand that he did n't own quite all the earth."

At the same time Midget, perched proudly on his brother's shoulder, with one little arm about his neck, held up in the other hand his bunch of heliotropes, as if to show that he had come off triumphant.

With the trees and shrubs of the brookside for a

background, they formed a picture that made the mother smile, with moist eyes.

"Well, I hope it is all over," she said, "and that you won't go near him again."

"I sha'n't go near him, be sure! But it is n't all over. The Melvertons shall know how he treated Laurie," Tracy declared. "The idea of punishing him for picking a flower, where he has always been as free as the birds are, and as welcome!"

"It is exasperating," said Mrs. Lisle, as they walked up toward the parsonage. "Gideon did n't consider. But I've no doubt he is sorry enough now. Don't, my son, think for a moment of reporting him to the Melvertons."

"He deserves it," said Tracy, scowling at the recollection of the wrong. "Why did they ever engage such a fellow to take care of the place?"

"To encourage him, I suppose, and to help his hard-working mother. The Melvertons do a great deal for her, as they do for everybody who needs their help," said Mrs. Lisle; "and no doubt they thought it would be wise to help her in this way."

"It seems to me like encouraging laziness," replied Tracy. "Gid bragged to the boys the other day of his 'snap'; he was to have five dollars a week just for doing—what? I'd like to do all he

does, and more, with no pay at all, merely as a return for what the Melvertons are always doing for us. They might know I would. What did they pass by me for, and get a Ketterell boy?—of all boys in this town!” he exclaimed indignantly.

They had reached the porch of the old parsonage, and Mrs. Lisle, seated in a porch-chair, was waiting for the child to bring a dry frock and a comb she had sent him for.

“I ’m afraid you are a little jealous, my son,” she replied. “If any good can come to one of poor Mrs. Ketterell’s family, you should rejoice, as I do.”

“If he would only do something to deserve it, and behave himself!” Tracy murmured, seating himself on the porch rail. “That ’s all. How cunning he is, is n’t he?” gazing intently at the child’s forehead, as the hair was combed smoothly away from it.

The little hand was still clasping the bunch of flowers. Midget had returned in a dry frock, which his sister Ida had put on him, and his mother had taken him on her lap.

“The idea of anybody being harsh or mean with him!” exclaimed Tracy. “It makes me want to go right back and give that fellow a well-deserved thrashing!”

“What fellow? How did Laurie get wet?” inquired the sister, a girl of seventeen, with graceful ways, and a complexion like a peach, which contrasted charmingly with her plain house-dress.

She had followed Midget to the porch to learn the particulars of the story he had tried to tell her. Then a man’s voice was heard, and Mr. Walworth, the young minister who boarded at the parsonage, mounted the steps. He, too, must know what had happened.

“Laurie has had a little shower-bath; nothing serious,” Mrs. Lisle answered pleasantly.

She was willing to let the matter pass so. But Tracy, boy-like, still burning with indignation, poured forth his own version of the adventure.

Mr. Walworth, a slender, quiet young man, stood hat in hand, listening with interest, and watching the combing of the child’s hair, then remarked dryly, lifting his eyes to Ida’s:

“One might do Gideon a more substantial favor than to let Fred Melverton know of this.”

“We won’t let him know,” said Ida, a warm color mounting to her cheeks. “Midget is none the worse for his little shower-bath. I should be ashamed to trouble the Melvertons with so trifling an affair.”

"You are very forgiving," said the young minister, with a smile of admiring approval; for he had noticed how indignant Ida was while listening to the story.

"*I'm* not!" said Tracy, far from pacified. "But Fred sha'n't hear of it from me. Only, Gid Ketterell must keep his hands and his hose-sprinkler off from our Laurie in future."

It was n't long before Midget was playing about the Melverton place again, without paying much heed to Gideon. But Tracy took care not to cross the boundary brook.

CHAPTER VI

"IT 'S DEAD AGAINST THE RULES."



ON the following Tuesday (we shall have reason to remember the day), Gid Ketterell was fitting his key to the back door of the Melverton house late in the afternoon, when a green apple came skipping along the walk and hit his foot. He turned suddenly, and saw an unwelcome face smiling through the shrubbery above the grassy bank.

"Look here, Osk Ordway," he said, "there 's no market for green sass on these premises!" And he kicked the apple away.

"Oh, close your candy-trap!" said Osk, good-naturedly, coming over the bank.

He was a strongly built youth, with a bend in his shoulders that threw his head well forward, and gave him an air of peering curiously into things, with a pair of small keen eyes, from under prominent brows. He had a powerful neck,

a white throat, and a short, curved nose. There was a humorous quirk to his mouth and he spoke with a sarcastic drawl as he came forward.

"You have n't got the deed of this property yet, Gid. The boys said you seemed to think you had; but I ventured to remark that you would n't play the Grand Mogul with me."

"There 's no Grand Mogul about it," Gid replied; "but I came here on one condition, as I told 'em — that I was n't to have any loafing about the place."

"But that don't apply to me, you know," said Osk, laughing.

"It applies to you particularly," Gid replied; and the two stood looking into each other's eyes, Gid with a weak assumption of authority, Osk with amused insolence.

"How have I gained that honor — me particularly?" Osk drawled.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" Gid asked.

"If you have n't been too long out of practice, and got rusty, give us a sample."

"Here it is, then! I hope you 'll like the quality and send in your order. Fred Melverton says to me, he says, 'You are not to have any loafers around, and I warn you against that Oscar Ord-

way particularly.' I did n't mean to tell you, and hurt your feelings," Gid continued, "but you forced me to."

"Oh, you don't hurt my feelings in the least. It 's too killing! I knew I should be entertained if I came to look at you on your throne, Gid, but I did n't expect this." Osk seemed choking with laughter. "Don't say another word, or I shall drop in my tracks. A good smart fly might kick me over!"

"I 'm glad it amuses you," said Gideon, blushing very red.

"Amuses *me*? Why, I 'm thinking how it will tickle the boys! I know they 'll ask why Fred Melverton did n't put *me* in charge, and warn me against *you*, and I 'm bothered if I can tell 'em. But see here, Gid!" Oscar became less savagely ironical. "You and I are too old friends for this. We 've been on too many after-dark watermelon raids and grape-spoiling expeditions together. What are you going to do now?"

Gid could bear anything better than ridicule, and he was glad to escape from Osk's.

"I 've got to shut up the house," he replied. "I 've had the windows open to air it off; now I 'm going to fasten up and go home."

"I thought you 'd be going, about this time; hurry up, and I 'll go with you," said Osk.

"All right," Gid replied, glad to get rid of him in that way, "if you don't mind waiting."

"I 'd sooner go in with you than wait outside," Osk said, making a motion to enter with him. "I 'd like to see the inside of this house; they say it 's out of sight."

"It is—out of sight for you!" Gid exclaimed, trying to keep him back.

"Oh, bosh!" Osk said, forcing his way in. "Where 's the harm?"

"If anybody knew!" Gid faltered weakly.

"Anybody ain't going to know," said Osk. He was already inside, peering about with his deep-set eyes, but taking care not to betray too much admiration. "It 's all very fine, as the toad said of the new garden-rake; but I 'd just as lief be in my own comfortable hole. A man can't more than live if you put him into a gold-and-silver house," he added philosophically.

"It 's dead against the rules, letting you in here!" Gid remonstrated, irritated and anxious.


"I understand all that," said Osk, putting him carelessly aside. "By the way, speaking of gold and silver, I 'd give more to see that prize cup Fred

won on the Fourth than all these fine fixings. Do you know where it is?"

"If I do," replied Gideon, "it won't do you any good." And he went on closing windows and blinds, followed from room to room by his persistent companion.

CHAPTER VII

“SHOW ME THAT CUP!”

“ HIS is Fred's room, I 'll bet ten thousand dollars, or half I 'm worth!” Osk exclaimed, as they entered a chamber that particularly struck his fancy. “Does he fence? or are those foils crossed over the mantel-piece just for ornament? Now, say, Gid,”—without waiting for a reply—“is it here?”

“You mean the cup? No; it is n't,” said Gideon, as he pulled down a curtain. “Come along, and I 'll show you a den that beats this—just a dandy, you 'll say yourself.”

Osk Ordway, bending his brows and peering closely at everything, left the room reluctantly. Gid waited to close the door after him, and then ushered him into a smaller chamber across the entry.

“This is Frank's,” said Gideon, proudly; “just

a little tumbled up, for he left it in a hurry, I guess, the morning they went off, and his mother did n't have time to follow him around. These bronze horses take my eye—and these pictures of horses! Ain't they fine?"

"Y-e-s," Osk drawled, scrutinizing everything; "nice knickknacks in this room. Does he use the boxing-gloves?"

"Of course he does, and he 'll box you if you don't keep your hands off!" Gid declared, seeing that Osk seemed inclined to handle everything.

"What am I hurting?" cried the visitor. "You 're a fussy kind of a watch-dog. Don't you know a friend from a stranger?"

"Yes; but I don't want a thing moved out of its place," Gid replied, as he put his head out of a window to reach a blind.

Osk laughed quietly, and took up with his thumb and finger an embroidered silk handkerchief that lay in a rumpled heap on Frank Melverton's dressing-table. He had no intention of keeping it, but was actuated by idle curiosity, quickened, perhaps, by a reckless determination to do as he pleased in spite of Gid's warnings.

But the lifted handkerchief exposed an object that instantly and to a violent degree excited his

cupidity. It was all he could do to keep from grasping it, as he would certainly have done if Gid had n't at that moment closed the blind with a sharp click, and drawn in his head. Osk dropped the handkerchief again over the glittering temptation, and had a few seconds to reflect upon what he was about to do before Gid went to another window.

When at last Gid turned to his companion, he found him standing a little way from the dressing-table, with his hands behind him, in a most innocent attitude, puckering his brows in the subdued light, and whistling softly.

Gid noticed, as he led the way through the lower rooms, that his friend appeared strangely absent-minded by fits, and then again unduly hilarious; and finally said to him:

"What 's the matter with you, Osk, anyway?"

Osk was ready with an excuse for his moodiness.

"That prize cup," he replied. "You said it was n't in Fred's room; now, where is it?" They had reached the dining-room; he stood before Gideon, laughing maliciously. "You don't get me out of this house until you show me that cup."

"I can't. I don't know where it is," said Gideon, defending himself, for Osk grasped his neck with

rough playfulness. “Let me alone, Osk Ordway!”

“You know where it is well enough,” said Osk, pressing in his thumb over Gid’s collar-bone, with a grim consciousness of his superior strength. “No use, Gid. I don’t go out of this house, and I don’t let you go, till I’ve seen that prize cup.”

“I’ll scream! You hurt!” Gid cried, trying in vain to shake off the ruthless clutch.

“I’ll hurt more yet, and you won’t scream twice,” replied Osk. He loosened his hold, however. “See here, Gid, it’s all in fun!”

“Pretty mean kind of fun, I say!” Gid muttered sulkily — “choking a fellow that way! Will you go now?”

“No, I won’t,” said Osk. “I’m in earnest about that. Oh, come now, Gid! Just give me a peep. I won’t touch it, and I won’t tell. I’ll choke you again!” He laughed, but with a keen menace in his eyes.

“You’d no business to force yourself into the house the way you did, anyway,” said Gideon.

“I made it my business; and here I am,” replied Osk, with smiling arrogance. “I generally have my way about things, don’t I? And I stand by the fellows that stand by me. I don’t care *that*

for the cup,"—snapping his fingers. "Only I 've said I 'll see it, and I will."

Gid expostulated; Osk wheedled, threatened, coaxed. And before long the weaker character yielded.

At the end of the dining-room was the handsome sideboard, with a few pieces of china on the upper shelf, and closed drawers beneath. Gid reached his hand under the large shelf, found a key somewhere at the back, and with it unlocked the drawer.

Osk uttered an exclamation of surprise as Gid opened the drawer and exposed the gold-lined silver prize, on a red napkin. He reached to grasp it, but Gid held him back.

"What you 'fraid of? I won't hurt it," he said. "A reg'lar old glory, ain't it? Open a blind, Gid, so we can see it better."

"Pshaw! There 's light enough," said Gid, hesitating, yet pleased and proud to be able to excite his friend's admiration.

The room was indeed rather gloomy. Over the sideboard was a high window of stained glass, which subdued the light that came through it to a deep crimson tone. All the other windows had closed blinds. Two, on the side of the piazza,

reached almost to the floor. Gid had just closed one of these; he now raised the sash again, a little way, and, reaching out, partly opened a blind, letting in a streak of brighter light, by which Osk reëxamined the cup.

"I ain't touching it," he said, in answer to Gid's remonstrance, as he took the prize up on the napkin. "There 's a pile of silver in it, Gid. Do you suppose it 's solid?"

"Of course it 's solid," replied Gid. "Fred Melverton would n't have anything to do with it if it was n't."

"Just heft it," said Osk.

"I have," said Gid, with a scared sort of smile. "I know just how heavy it is."

"He has n't got his name on it yet," Osk observed. "But there 's the rest of the inscription; so it would have to be melted up."

"What do you mean?" cried Gideon, alarmed.

"I was thinking. Suppose somebody not quite so honest as you and I should have the handling of it!" Oscar laughed.

"Come, put it back!" Gid whispered anxiously.

"That 's just what I 'm going to do; and you see your showing it to me has n't hurt it in the least. But I 'm glad I 've seen it," said Osk, re-

placing the cup in the drawer, with the napkin spread out under it. "Now, shall I tell you the fault I find with that cup?"

"That you did n't win it yourself, I suppose," replied Gideon, beginning to feel relieved.

"That it was n't made to drink out of—that 's its chief fault," said Osk, closing the drawer. "That ain't my idea of a cup. Splendid as it is, it would n't make your drink taste any better. Makes me thirsty, though, thinking of it. Gid," he continued, "my throat is dry as an ash-barrel. There must be something in this house to treat your friends with."

"I don't know anything about that," Gid muttered.

"It 's time you did know. Come, I 'll help you make discoveries. The expressman used to bring out cases of bottled cider to the Melvertons. I bet we can find a pint or two left over. I 'm going to explore the cellar."

"No, you 're not!" And, as Osk started off, Gid hastened after him.

There was another dispute—a scuffle; and again the weaker character yielded to the stronger. We will not follow them to see what they found in the lower regions of the house. Osk was smacking his

lips and looking complacent when they returned to the dining-room.

"Here, don't forget this key!" he said, taking it from the drawer and handing it to Gid.

"I guess not!" Gid exclaimed, startled to think how near he had come to leaving it in the lock; and he carefully returned it to its place under the shelf.

He looked around to see that he had left the dining-room in good order, and then accompanied Osk to the door by which they had entered.

"You must n't be seen going out of the house if you can help it," he said; "and I must n't be seen with you. Get over into the ravine, and I will follow, and maybe find you down by the river."

"I'm going to look at that phoebe's nest under the bridge," Osk replied. "It's time for the birds to be starting a second brood."

"There are eggs in it now," said Gid. "I've seen 'em. But don't you touch one of 'em. Little Midget is there, looking into the nest, every day, and if it's disturbed there'll be a row."

"Who's going to disturb it?" Osk replied. Leaving Gid to watch him from the doorway, he retired over the bank, and disappeared in the ravine.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PHOEBE'S NEST



AFTER a little delay Gid passed out through the front yard, crossed the street, stepped down over a bank-wall near the bridge, and took a well trodden brook-side path leading to the river—a path frequented by fishermen and rambling boys, from immemorial time.

On his right was the brook, which gurgled over its stones and pebbles. On his left, clumps of sumacs and barberries grew. Passing near a mass of these, Gid shied suddenly, like a frightened colt, and stepped off, splashing, into the water.

"What are you down there for?" said a mocking voice from the bushes.

"Osk Ordway!" Gid exclaimed, scrambling back to the path. "You scare a fellow! Seeing your head poked out from the bushes that way,—without your hat,—I did n't know you from a wildcat."

"I must have been a pretty tame wildcat to sit still while you passed near enough to brush my cat's whiskers, if I had had any," said Osk, peering up at him with his keen, curious eyes. "I 've got something to show you."

He was sitting on a rock, with his hat between his knees, and his hands spread over it with an air of mystery.

Gid turned pale. Ever since parting with Osk, he had been so troubled with misgivings in regard to his own weak conduct in showing him the cup, that he was ready to imagine the most absurd consequences of his indiscretion. He firmly believed that if that daring and unscrupulous youth wished to get possession of so much solid silver, he would find sure means of doing so, since he knew where it could be obtained. And now for an instant the wild thought thrilled him that, before his very eyes in the dining-room, or perhaps when his back was turned for a moment, Osk had by some puzzling feat got the goblet into his hat, and that he had it there, covered with his hands, in the bushes.

Of course, it was preposterous. Osk was n't a fool; and if he had succeeded, by any such hocus-pocus, in conveying the cup from the house, it was

extremely improbable that he would have sat there, waiting to show it to anybody.

That was the conclusion Gid came to, after a moment's reflection. "What is it?" he demanded, with fluttering eagerness.

And Osk smilingly removed his hands. It was, after all, a relief to Gideon to see that what they had covered was not the cup. Yet what he saw roused his resentment.

"Oh, Osk," he exclaimed, "how could you do that? You promised me you would n't!"

"No," replied Osk, coolly; "I said, 'Who is going to disturb it?' I put the question. I did n't answer it; if I had, I should have said *I* was going to. 'Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow, I killed Cock Robin.' Ain't it a daisy?"

"Yes — but —" Gid bent over the hat with looks of mingled envy and admiration, pity and reproach. "Why *did* you, Osk?"

What he saw was something more wonderful, rightly considered, than any gold or silver goblet the hand of man ever wrought. It was a nest of the common pewee, or phoebe-bird, containing three of those delicate, white-walled, orbic cells of life whose mystery the utmost ingenuity of man

cannot even comprehend; each a miniature world in itself, a pearly drop of beauty inclosing a new creation, possibilities of life and joy, of song and wings—little marvels we call eggs!

Did you ever see a phœbe's nest? I will try to describe to you this one.

It is not at all a thing of the imagination, but an actual nest that I have just taken from a case where it is kept, and placed upon the table before me, where I write.

It was first shown to me by the little deaf-mute himself, when I was visiting at the parsonage that summer; for it was Midget's delight to lead his friends, young or old, down the brookside to the bridge, and let them take one peep at the small tower-shaped structure under it, built against a beam, over the abutting wall. There, in the cool cavern-like gloom, the phœbes had fixed their home, undismayed by the hoofs and wheels of the highway, clattering and thundering close above their heads. A single egg was in the nest when I saw it dimly—undoubtedly one of the three Osk afterward carried away.

Midget would allow me to take only one little peep, for fear of worrying the parent birds; though they knew him so well as their small friend that

they did n't appear to be much afraid. I can look at the nest all I wish to now.

The whole structure is a little more than three inches high, and four or five inches across from side to side; flat at the back, where it was plastered with dabs of mud to the beam, and flat also on the bottom, where it rested on the abutment wall. It is made of moss, hair, fine stems of grass, and twigs or roots almost as fine, with here and there a bit of string or fleck of wool, all woven together in a fine and compact mass, with a cup-shaped hollow at the top. This hollow is the nest proper, measuring about three inches across, and softly lined with the fibers and down of plants. When Midget climbed up on the stones to point it out to me, it looked like a bunch of moss growing on the side of the timber, the moss still green with the dampness of the place. But the moss is now faded, and the nest shows signs of rough treatment.

In this nest there were, when Osk carried it off, three eggs, as I have said; they were of a delicate creamy tint, with a few scattered reddish spots, chiefly about the larger end. These markings were unusually pretty, as Gid noticed. Kneeling down and looking into Osk's hat, he again exclaimed:

"What *made* you do it? Say!"

"I am going to start a collection," Osk replied.

"Your collection never 'll amount to anything; none of the boys' collections ever do," said Gid. "They get tired of seeing the nests knocking around; some of the shells get broken; then they kick the rubbish outdoors, or their mothers do. See here, Osk, take it back to the bridge, won't you?"

"What 'll I take it back to the bridge for, after I 've been to the trouble of bringing it away?" Osk retorted. "I thought the old birds would pick my eyes out. Did n't they make a fuss and flirt their tails!"

"Oh, take it back, Osk, before it is missed!" Gid pleaded, moved partly by compassion, but quite as much by his fear of disagreeable consequences to himself. "It won't be long before Midget will notice the trouble with the birds, and find out what has happened. There 'll be an inquiry, and I 'm afraid I 'll be brought into it. You know the law on birds and nests."

"Bah!" said Osk, contemptuously. "Why, the fellows around here are always getting birds and nests, and we never hear of one being complained of."

"We never have yet, but it 's going to be dif-

ferent now," Gid replied. "I don't dare to be seen here with you."

He looked anxiously up and down the brook and over the tops of the bushes to see if anybody was in sight. Osk demanded what he meant.

"Fred Melverton and four or five others have agreed together that this robbing nests and killing birds must be stopped; so Fred himself told me. They 're going to see that the first one caught doing it is prosecuted. There 's a ten-dollar fine, you know."

"But how am I going to be found out or complained of?" Osk replied. "Nobody saw me; nobody 'll know it but you; and you ain't going back on a friend, Gid. 'T will be all your neck 's worth, if you do."

"No," said Gid; "I sha'n't give you away. But I know Fred is in earnest; and his folks and the Lisles thought everything of this nest. I know I shall be hauled up and questioned."

"Confound it, yes!" Osk exclaimed. "And you 're one of the kind they can worm anything out of, whether you want them to or not. Why did n't you let on about this agreement when I told you at the door I was going for the nest?"

"I had no idea you would take it; you said as

much. You won't dare to start a collection; there'll be no fun in it if you can't show it; and if you show it you'll get found out, sure."

"I don't know what I touched the thing for," said Osk, looking down with disgust at the contents of his hat. "Here, you may take it back to the bridge!"

"I don't dare touch it!" Gid exclaimed, recoiling with affright.

"Then I suppose I must," said Osk; "though I don't see how I am going to make it stay in place. It won't rest on the stone unless it's made fast to the string-piece."

"Can't you stick it on with something?" Gid inquired.

"I don't know. I can set it on the stone; then if it tumbles off it will look as if it was an accident. I'll manage somehow. And see here, Gid!" Osk laughed recklessly, ashamed of having betrayed such weakness; "if you tell on me—you understand!"

Gid promised solemnly. "I must go now," he said, and hurried away.

CHAPTER IX

THE TWO BICYCLE-RIDERS



IDEON did not see Osk again for two or three days, and he did not venture to look under the bridge to learn the fate of the phœbe's nest. He was only too thankful that Osk kept away from him, and he endeavored to forget the incidents of that single, compromising visit by giving stricter attention to his duties.

One morning, three days after that memorable Tuesday, he was running a light lawn-mower in front of the house, when two young men in trim bicycle suits, mounted on handsome wheels, whirled rapidly into the driveway, and dismounted at the piazza steps.

Gid stopped to lift his hat as they went humming past him, muttering to himself, "I'm awful glad he happened to ketch me at work!" while his guilty breast swelled with anxious apprehensions.

The two riders turned their machines over on the turf; and when they stood erect, side by side, you could see that one was a full head taller than the other. The taller one was Fred Melverton. He wore his dark gray cap and suit, while his friend, a stranger to Gid, was clad in a suit of lighter gray.

The friend was no such young Apollo as Fred appeared. His shorter limbs, however, showed a rugged strength; he had a sandy complexion, and an expression full of a certain bright mirthfulness, which gave a peculiar allurements to features otherwise rather plain. Do you see him in your mind's eye, laughingly lifting his cap to pass a handkerchief over his face, showing a white forehead, crowned by carelessly tossed locks of deep-red hair? Then let me introduce him: Mr. Canton Quimby, of Yale.

"Canton" is an odd name for a boy, you think. I remember once hearing him tell how he came by it. His father, during the early years of his married life, served his country abroad in various capacities, and his mother had named her children after the places in which they happened to be born. So the oldest girl was called Florence—a very pretty name. The second child (also a girl)

saw the light when the father was secretary of legation at Vienna. The parents hesitated a little at the name; but Mrs. Quimby saw no good reason for objecting to it, and "Vienna" Quimby grew up so charming a girl that everybody wondered why no girl had ever been so christened before.

"Then my father was sent to Constantinople, and there my eldest brother was born. Constantinople was a poser! My father would n't hear of it, and my mother was staggered. But they finally compromised on Constant, which is a very good name for a good fellow. You will readily understand that I was born in Canton,—not quite so good a name, but good enough for the bearer. So far," young Quimby rattled merrily on, "the rule had worked very well, and my mother was triumphant. She has always been exceedingly tenacious of her ideas; but when she had two children born, one in Copenhagen and one in Amsterdam, she acknowledged that the fates were against her. They are called Capen and Amy—quite a breakdown, you see, of her scheme. She could n't forgive the government for not sending my father to Paris, and afterward giving him the consul-generalship at Rome, when he asked for it; for 'Paris' and 'Roma' would have been very good names; and

a little obligingness on the part of each administration would have saved her system. But administrations don't always consider!" he concluded, with a laugh.

But we are rambling from our story, which has nothing to do with the Quimby family, except that vivacious member of it, the Yale junior, who passed his babyhood and got his name in China.

Gid Ketterell, seeing the young master beckon to him, left his lawn-mower and hastened toward the house.

"How are you getting along, Gideon?" Fred inquired.

"All right, I guess," Gid replied.

"Any callers since we 've been away?"

"Not when I 've been here; I guess about everybody knows the house is shut up."

"Have you kept it well aired?"

"I 've had some of the windows open four or five hours every good day."

"Are they open this morning?"

"No; it seemed so cool this morning," Gid said, growing more and more confident as he found himself able to answer these simple questions, as he believed, satisfactorily.

"So cool?" Fred Melverton smiled, but not al-

together in approval of Gid's judgment. "It is cool, and that is all the better for airing the house, as I thought I explained to you. A simple fact"—addressing his companion, without noticing Gid's blank face—"which it is very hard for some people to comprehend. A warm south wind let into a cool house, especially into a cellar, will often deposit more moisture than it takes away. The cold walls condense it; and the owners, who choose such days for ventilation on the theory that warm air must always be a drying air, wonder why their houses continue damp, and why the hard-wood floors hump, in summer weather."

The young man again addressed Gideon, who stood staring rather stupidly.

"Don't you remember, I cautioned you against opening the windows in muggy weather, even if the sun should be shining? But a cool dry air, like this to-day,—wind northwest,—admitted once or twice a week, will keep even a cellar in good condition. I tried to make the reason clear to you: that ordinary warm air let into a cool apartment shrinks, and, like a moist sponge when you squeeze it, tends to part with its humidity; while a cool current, passing through a warm space, expands, and tends to suck up any particles of moisture that come in its way."

"But you said it might be necessary to have a fire in the furnace, just to dry off the house—and that makes hot air," Gid murmured confusedly.

For a moment Fred Melverton appeared slightly discomfited. The young man who was named for a Chinese city looked as if he enjoyed Gid's answer, as he did everything that could be turned into a joke.

"Your philosophy has got a poke under the fifth rib, Melf!—if philosophy can be said to have a fifth rib," he remarked dryly, while his eyes danced with suppressed fun.

A hopeful smile dawned, struggled, and finally spread all over Gid's face, as for a moment he was made to imagine that he had really advanced an argument that had perhaps floored a Melverton.

But Fred was not entirely prostrate, as Canton Quimby was pleased to observe; he was pausing to think how he should shape an explanation that would enter even the dullest comprehension. Not so complimentary to Gid's wit as Gid supposed.

"You say I spoke of a furnace fire. I did; and I said I would send word to you if I thought it necessary to build one. Now, what does a furnace fire do? It takes the air from out-of-doors, even humid air, and expands it so that it becomes a volume of comparatively dry air when it is poured

through the registers. Then all the air in the house that is n't driven out by it warms and expands also, and becomes thirsty to absorb moisture. Do I make myself understood?"

Seeing the blank expression come again into Gid's face, Fred Melverton turned once more to his friend.

"A little common sense is a good thing to use on occasions!" he remarked, with an air that implied a conscious possession on his part of more than an average share of the quality in question.

"I 'll go in now and open the windows," Gid volunteered.

"Never mind," said Fred; "I am going to take my friend in, and I will attend to them. Come, Quimby!" producing a key from his pocket, turning it in the lock, and throwing the broad front door wide open.

Gid was n't greatly disturbed by the little lecture upon ventilation, any uneasiness that might have been caused by Fred's faultfinding being lost in a deeper anxiety. With a scared smile he watched the two young men as they passed on into the house, and then he returned slowly to his lawn-mower.

CHAPTER X

“STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN IN THIS HOUSE!”



H, I like hard-wood floors!" said Canton Quimby, as he was ushered into the ample hallway of the Melverton mansion. "And these are fine ones!"

"If there's anything my mother particularly prides herself upon," Fred Melverton replied, "it is her oak floors. They're neat, but they require a vast deal of attention. They must be skilfully laid, and scraped, and dressed, in the first place. Then they have to be kept waxed, polished, and dusted—every hair or speck of lint shows; but all that is very well. The great trouble is that they shrink, and the seams open, when you have hot furnace fires in winter; and, on the other hand, they swell and bulge if the house gathers dampness in summer. Hence the need of careful management of your fires, and of a rational

system of ventilation. I explained everything to that boy the first day he was here, and you see the result."

"We must n't expect too much of the average human biped's intelligence," said Quimby, as the two passed on into the dining-room. "What a floor for a roller-skating rink!" he exclaimed, laughing.

"My mother would be horrified if she should hear you say that," replied his friend. "Sit down, old fellow, and I'll see if I can scare up a little refreshment. I think it will be acceptable after our eighteen-mile run, and with another eighteen miles before us."

He started to open a window on the side of the piazza.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed. "This sash is n't fastened. Nothing to prevent a person outside from pushing it up and walking right in! Pretty careless, I say, if it 's true that boy has n't been in and unfastened it this morning. I rather think it 's a good thing I took a run up here to look after matters."

"It 's a magnif' old dining-room!" Canton Quimby remarked, casting an admiring eye over the walls and ceiling. Then, seating himself with

a smile of content near the table of polished antique oak, he went on to praise the stained glass over the sideboard, the fireplace, and the carved mantel, in a way that made his friend pause and regard him with quiet satisfaction.

"Say all that to my mother if you wish to please her. This dining-room is her favorite room. Now sit and admire it, while I see what I can find. I can't promise much. I forewarn you that we've come to a poverty-stricken house."

"'Beggars all, beggars all, Sir John!'" quoted his friend, with a laugh.

"You'll find, to your sorrow, there's more truth in that, in our case, than there was in Master Shallow's," replied Fred.

From an adjoining china-closet he brought out a dish of crackers and a jar of olives that had been left behind by the family in its flight; and putting a plate before his friend, bade him "nibble" while he went in search of something "moist"; at the same time winking suggestively, and making with his mouth a sound as of a popping cork.

"I'm glad I came," said Quimby, winking in return, and proceeding to harpoon an olive with the long-handled jar-fork. "Do you know," he called after Fred, who was departing for the cellar, "in

the six months we spent in Italy and France, we never saw such olives as these?"

"That's another observation that will please my worthy mama," Fred replied, pausing with his hand on the door-knob. "But that may not be saying very much; one never seems to see any first-class olives in Italy." He went off in high spirits, was gone an "unconscionable while," his friend thought, and finally returned with a frown on his brow, and a solitary pint bottle in his hand. "You 'll think I 'm a jolly fraud!" he declared. "I could have sworn there were at least three or four bottles of cider in the case. But the bottles of cider have been reduced to mere cider-bottles—all empty but this!"

"Well, that will be empty pretty soon; so don't worry," the guest replied gaily.

"But I 'm astonished—I 'm mortified!" Fred exclaimed. "It 's like the fox inviting the crane to supper—though in this instance the fox is as badly off as the crane."

"You don't imagine that lubber outside—?" Quimby suggested. "I noticed he smole a smile, when he saw us coming in, not quite healthy; like a smile raised under glass—rather forced; not the smile of an easy-conscienced lubber."

"I did n't notice it." Fred opened the bottle, darkly musing. "I 'll have him in here, and start an inquisition."

"There, there! Hold your horses!" cried the guest, as Melverton was filling his glass. "Don't give me more than my share, or I 'll swap glasses with you. Good sparkle, hey? I 'm glad he had the considerashe to leave us even one bottle!"

"I really can't think he has taken any," Fred remarked, seating himself opposite his friend. "He is n't that kind of a boy."

"There are always fewer bottles in a case than you think there are," the red-haired one suggested, as he nibbled and sipped. "To be quite confidensh with you, Melf, your little lunch is n't half bad! It goes to the right spot—if I 've got a right spot, and know where to locate it. The cider 's splendif'; just the right age. And enough of it. I never take anything stronger. I 'm a tee-tote, myself."

"So am I," said Fred; "though I think we might stand another bottle, without breaking a pledge. Now,"—he put a fragment of cracker into his mouth, and rose, leaving his glass unfinished,— "I 've told you what my mother is proud of; what I 'm proud of is here."

"Oh, your prize! I had n't forgotten that," re-

plied the guest, that being, indeed, one thing he had made the morning's ride to see.

Melverton turned to the sideboard, reached under the shelf, found the key, fitted it in the lock, and uttered an exclamation. The key would n't turn!

"But it turns the other way," he said immediately. "Do you see?—the drawer was n't locked! Strange things happen in this house, in our absence!"

So saying, he pulled the drawer open, and then stood looking down into it with dumb amazement.

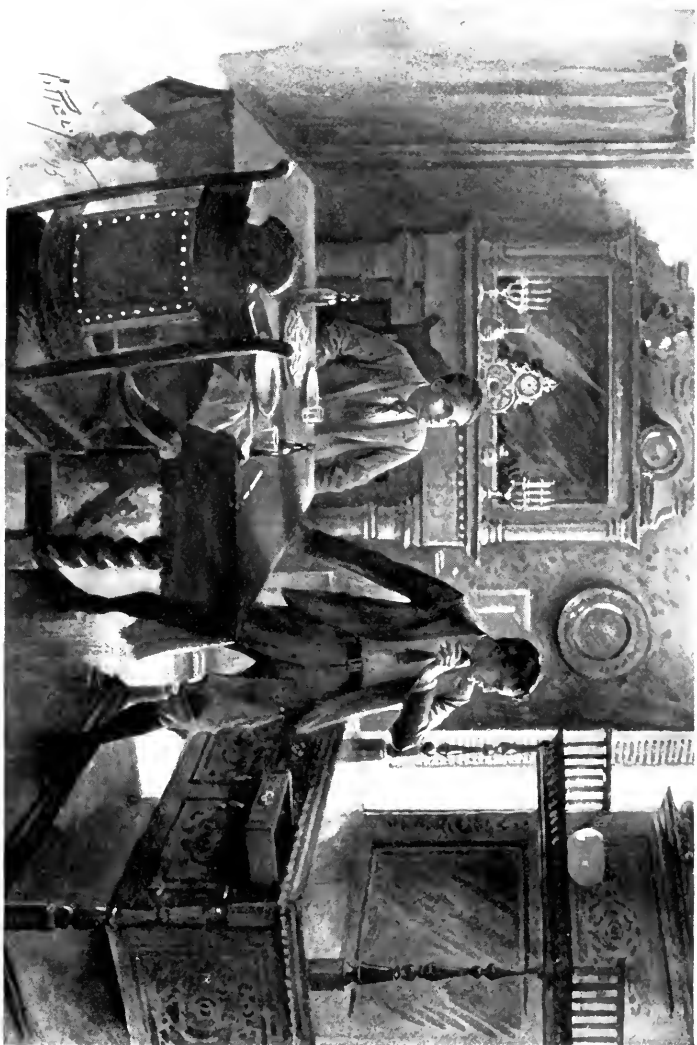
"What 's the troub'?" cried the guest, also rising from the table, with an olive in his fingers.

"The cup!" ejaculated the dazed young man, pulling the drawer well out, and staring into it. "The cup is gone!"

With hurry and trepidation Fred opened in turn all the drawers, then backed away from the sideboard, regarding it with brows contracted and lips compressed, in utter amazement and incredulity.

Then he turned to his companion.

"You 'll think I 'm a bigger fraud than ever!" he exclaimed. "But, by George! wherever it 's gone, there *was* a cup!"

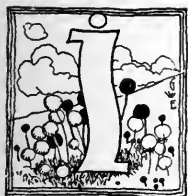


"THE CUP IS GONE!"



CHAPTER XI

“WHERE ’S THAT CUP?”



IT was ten minutes after this that the winner of the prize cup stepped out from the open door, put up a beckoning hand, and called in a very gentle voice, as if he had been addressing the most innocent of the Babes in the Wood:

“Gideon, if you please! Here, a minute!”

There was nothing in his look or tone to indicate the slightest inquietude of mind; so that Gid experienced a sense of relief to his ever-growing apprehensions.

Fred had had time to discuss the situation with his friend, and to prepare for a calm, judicial inquiry. As he stepped back into the house, Gid followed, with a countenance almost too open and candid. It was, however, startled a little out of its childlike innocence of expression by the aspect of the solitary bottle on the table.

"The house seems to be in pretty good condition," Melverton remarked, standing with his hand on the back of his friend's chair; Quimby meanwhile playing with his empty glass, and smiling upon Gideon.

"I'm glad you find it so," said Gideon, gratefully.

"After we are gone," Fred proceeded, "you can take the empty bottle to the cellar. You know where the case is?"

Gid gave a little gasp, but answered promptly, "I guess I can find it."

He felt the eyes of both young men upon him, and his face, which was slightly pale at first, began to flush.

"When were you in the house last?" inquired the young proprietor.

"When I shut it up yesterday afternoon."

"Oh! I remember! You had n't opened the windows to-day."

"No," said Gid; "I was just going to, when you came."

"You had n't been in the house, then, since yesterday?"

The inquiries were taking a direction that did n't seem at all alarming; yet Gid felt that he was on

the brink of some danger. As he really had not been in the house since the day before, he thought he might as well stick to the truth—and stuck to it.

"How happens it, then, that this window was unclasped?"

"Was it?" Gid exclaimed, in genuine surprise.

"I found it so," Fred Melverton replied. "Any rogue could have got in."

Gid looked hot and troubled. But he said earnestly:

"I don't know how it happened. I thought I clasped it. I can't understand!"

He began to tremble, remembering that he had not opened that window since the afternoon when he left the room in such haste to follow Osk Ordway to the cellar. He had, indeed, avoided that part of the house ever since, on account of the disagreeable associations his conscience connected with it.

"When did you have it open last?" Fred inquired.

"I—can't remember," Gid replied, fearful of committing himself.

"You have n't had any of your friends in the house since you have been in charge?" Fred smilingly queried.

For a moment Gid felt the dreadful necessity of telling the simple truth, and gaining some sort of foothold in the mire of deception in which he felt himself sinking. But the spirit of Osk Ordway seemed to control him, and he answered stoutly:

“No; of course not.”

“And—you said you guessed you could find the case of cider-bottles;—you had n’t found it already?”

And Gid repeated, even more emphatically, “No; of course not.”

He had drunk but little of the two bottles he had permitted Osk to open; and Osk had persuaded him that the Melvertons were not a family that counted their bottles very closely. Still he had been troubled with a dread of these questions, and he had made up his mind beforehand how he would answer then. A good, rousing falsehood, he hoped, would carry him through his present difficulties.

“I did n’t suppose you would,” said the young man, pleasantly. “Don’t consider me too inquisitive, but I would like to ask—who unlocked this drawer?”

Gid was stunned for a moment. Seeing the drawer closed, and the key in it, and being sure

he had not left it so, he wondered how Fred could have found out that it had been unlocked.

"That drawer!" he said, with growing agitation.

"Unlocked? I don't know anything about it!"

"Did you know what was in it?" Fred asked.

"Y—yes," Gid faltered. "I thought you put your prize cup in it the day you left me in charge."

"You saw that, did you?" Fred queried, looking sharply at him.

Gid was afraid he was admitting too much; but he answered:

"I could n't help seeing you put the cup in the drawer. I happened to look back just as I was leaving the room, that day you left for the sea-shore."

"There is no mistake, then, about my locking the cup in the drawer? I was beginning to think there might be," Fred remarked, so unsuspectingly and quietly that Gid was quite *sure* he had admitted too much.

"I ain't quite positive," he said. "I thought you put it in *one* of the drawers."

The questioner did not seem to notice this qualification, but added:

"And you 've been the only one in the house since?"

"For as I know," replied the culprit, aghast at what he felt sure was coming.

"Well, there 's the drawer," said Fred, opening it. "But it 's empty—like the bottles"—with a smile of gleaming sarcasm. "Gideon Ketterell!—where 's that cup?"

CHAPTER XII

GID'S ENTANGLEMENT



GID stepped to the drawer, and saw for himself that the prize cup was gone. Only the red napkin remained as it had been left when the cup was replaced, after he had shown it to Osk.

"Hain't you took it out?" he asked, as he turned an appealing look on Fred Melverton.

Fred replied, imperturbably:

"I have n't taken it, nor seen it, since you were witness to my locking it in that drawer."

"Must have been stole!" Gid murmured. "Looks as though the house had been broke into!"

"It certainly *has* been stolen," the young master replied frankly. "And the house has been broken into, unless your key let the robber in."

"But I hain't took it!" Gid protested, with the utmost earnestness. "I don't know nothing about

it!" In times of unusual excitement he was apt to relapse into double negatives, an early habit, of which he was supposed to have been cured at school. "I wish I did!"

He was almost ready to cry. Better than that, he was almost ready to tell the truth. Why had he not done so before? Why had he not explained at once how Osk forced his way into the house, actually compelled him to show the cup, and then opened two bottles of the cider—drinking the most of it himself—in spite of him? Instead of that, he had gone on with denial after denial, winding himself up in this terrible entanglement, from which even confession itself might not clear him.

Fred Melverton put to him a few more searching questions, without obtaining satisfactory replies, then said quietly:

"I don't see that you will help me much in clearing up the mystery. You can go, Gideon, and await further orders."

Again Gideon turned toward him with red, appealing eyes.

"I hope you don't think I—" he uttered, with a lump in his throat.

"I am not prepared to say what I think," the

young man replied, with a resolute calmness more terrifying to poor Gid than violent threats or accusations would have been. "Go, now."

Gid hesitated, struggled with the lump in his throat, trying to speak, and finally withdrew without another word; but paused again at the door, with half a mind to go back and confess his own share in the transaction which he felt sure must at least have opened the way to the robbery. But that simple step required more courage than he possessed; and every moment was making it more difficult for him to take it. He slowly went down the steps, and presently the merry clatter of the lawn-mower was heard once more. But it was not a merry sound to Gid's ear.

Then Fred Melverton turned to his guest, who had all the while sat a silent spectator of the scene, and exclaimed:

"Old fellow, speak a word!"

And the guest replied, "It 's a funny conglom'!" meaning conglomeration, as we may as well interpret for the benefit of those who have n't heard young people spice their speech with these peculiar abbreviations.

"What do you make of that boy?" Melverton asked, walking nervously to and fro.

"Want my opin'? Let me tell you first, Melf," the guest answered, "what I make of you. I've thought the Tech" (Institute of Technology) "was your right place, and I was confirmed in that when I saw you befog that boy's brain (if he has one) with your jargon about ventilation, condensation, evaporation, and all the other 'ations. But now I'm under the impress' that you should have chosen the law."

"How do you make that out?" Melverton inquired.

"Why, the way you cross-exam'd that unwilling witness was worthy of a first-class pettifogger. You tangled him up like a dog-fish in a square rod of gill-netting."

"Was n't it his own fault?" Fred demanded, with some irritation.

"No doubt of it!" said Quimby. "It was not the bald-headed truth he was giving you. But it seemed to me you began at the wrong end of the string in trying to get the snarl out."

"I don't see, Canton!" Fred replied. "What are you driving at?"

"Suppose," said Canton Quimby, with a smile that would have sugar-coated his bitterest criticism—"suppose you had shown him the empty

drawer in the first place and given him time to think what a serious business it was, before you tried your corkscrew?"

"I was only trying to loosen the wires from the cork, before opening the bottle," Fred said, tossing back the figure of speech.

"Instead of that you were all the while twisting them tighter. You let him commit himself to one denial after another, in minor matters which involved tracks that led directly to the trap you had ready to spring upon him — tracks he could n't retrace. Do I make my meaning clear?"

"I should say so!" Fred exclaimed, with a rueful laugh. "Instead of opening his mouth I was ingeniously shutting it."

"Something like that," Quimby smilingly assented.

"How much does he know about the robbery?"

"Something; not everything," replied the guest.

"That 's the way I read him," said Melverton. "I can't think he stole the cup himself, but I 'm inclined to believe he knows who did. He 's mixed up in it."

Canton Quimby nodded approvingly, and said: "Of course he is."

"The cider I care nothing about; some not very

bad boys might fall into a temptation of that sort. And I could pardon his carelessness—if that 's the name for it—in leaving the window unclasped. But he is so evidently concealing something! I'm at a loss to know what to do."

"Want my opin'?"

"I should like it very much."

"Tell that youthful prevaricator he can put on his coat and go home. In short, fire him! That is," said the guest, "unless he will tell you where the cup is, or who has it."

"That 's the logic of it, of course," said Fred, again walking to and fro in troubled thought. "But I don't want to injure him. His mother is really a very worthy woman, and I hate a scandal."

"Naturally. But, Melf, it is n't generally thought wise to keep a person in a place of trust after he has shown himself unfaithful."

"You 're right every time," Fred said, hastily clearing the table; which done, the two went out and walked about the place.

"The house will be all right for a few days," remarked the young proprietor, musingly; "so will the lawn and the flower-beds. But I must get somebody to feed the cat and the poultry. I think I can manage that."

CHAPTER XIII

GID LOSES HIS SITUATION



HE lawn had been trimmed, and Gid Ketterell was running the inverted mower toward the barn, when Melverton intercepted him.

“Well, Gideon, you ’ve had a little time to think about it. You see how it is. Can you give me any idea how that cup has got hocus-pocused out of the house while you have been in charge? That ’s what we ’ve got to find out, you know.”

“I know it,” replied Gid. “And I ’d tell if I had the slightest notion what ’s become of it,—but I hain’t.”

In the interim of reflection he had fully resolved to stick to his original story, and admit nothing that would reflect blame upon himself.

“You can’t think of anybody who may have known about it, and got into the house and taken

it? For I can't find that anything else has been touched," Fred continued. "Seems to me you must be able to tell us something."

"I would if I could," Gid muttered, with a dogged, down look, tipping his hat-brim so as to hide his conscious face; "but I can't."

"Sorry!" replied Fred, exchanging glances with Canton Quimby, who stood by, twirling a flower in his fingers, but never losing a word of the dialogue. "I'm afraid I shall have to dispense with your services, Gideon."

"All right!" said Gideon, surlily. That was evidently what he had expected.

"The house has been entered, I rather think, more than once. Cider-bottles have been emptied; I find a sash unfastened, and a prize no money can replace has disappeared. Mind, I don't accuse you of anything. But look at it yourself — does n't it seem as if the place might have been better taken care of?"

"Maybe it might; don't know," Gid mumbled. He wanted to say more, but the lump was in his throat again; and, indeed, what could he say, unless he began by retracting his previous denials, the falsity of which he felt was certain some day to appear?

Fred waited a minute for him to speak, then said gently :

"I'll take your key of the house, if you please." Gid produced it from his pocket. "Thank you, Gideon."

"Sha'n't I carry that bottle to the cellar?" Gid inquired, looking up with a sullen despair in his eyes.

"No, I won't trouble you. The bottles will do very well without your attention," Fred replied, with a shade of sarcasm in his tones. "Let's see, you've been here — not quite so long as you might have stayed under other circumstances." He was opening his pocket-book, while Gid, his eyes once more cast down, kicked the graveled walk with his toes. "It was to be five dollars a week, was n't it?"

Gid's features worked, and a tear slid down his cheek. He had been so proud of his "snap," as he called it; and the money, to be so easily earned, had seemed so much to him! I regret to say, he had considered far less what it would be to his hard-working mother. It was as a hard-hitting mother that he thought of her now.

"We'll call it seven dollars," said Melverton, "if that strikes you favorably."

"I don't want your money," Gid muttered, sniffing away his tears. "I won't take it!"

He was turning away, convulsed with grief, or anger, or remorse, or dread of his mother, or all these together, when Fred laid a hand kindly on his shoulder, and with the other extended the bank-notes.

"Oh, yes, you will, Gideon!" he said, his voice trembling a little with sympathetic emotion. "Take it to your mother; she can't afford to miss anything you may have the luck to earn. I hoped you would earn a good deal for her and yourself during the summer. I am as much disappointed as you are, Gideon."

He thrust the bills under the boy's suspenders. Then, after a pause: "In parting with you, may I give you a bit of advice?—with the kindest feelings toward you, Gideon, understand. If another chance offers, be faithful,—and truthful, and—" His voice broke. "Gideon," he added, with an effort of self-control, "I am as sorry as you are; and—I—I wish you well!"

This was more than Gid could stand. He was prepared to encounter harsh and threatening words; but kindness was too much for him. He started to speak, but found he could n't without sobbing. If Fred had given him time, and asked him again to tell the truth, he might have told all.



"GID MOVED SULLENLY AWAY."

But Fred merely said, "Leave the barn key in the door, after you put away the mower," and walked off with his friend.

Gid obeyed, and with his coat on his arm moved sullenly away, muttering to himself revengefully: "It was Osk,—I know it was, as well as if I 'd seen him do it! It 's all up with me! I 'll just about kill him, when I ketch him, if ma don't kill me first!"

CHAPTER XIV

MIDGET AND HIS FRIENDS



“HAT do you think now?” Fred asked his friend, as he led the way down the bank toward the brooklet.

“Want my opin’?”

“I always want it.”

“In the first place,” said Canton Quimby, “I find I was mistaken, after all, about your proper sphere. It ’s neither science nor the law; it ’s the ministry.”

“How do you cipher that out?”

“Why, you talked to that scapegrace like a regular old parson. Almost made me cry!”

“I hope I have n’t wronged him! Or, rather, I hope I have! I shall be very glad to know that my suspicion is unfounded. I’m wondering what my mother will say,” Fred added dubiously.

“Your suspish’ is all right; founded on a rock,”

replied Quimby, confidently. "Did n't you see? He was on the very point of breaking down. Your old clergyman's talk went deep,—plowed a tremendous subsoil furrow,—really got down to his conscience, if you call it that, when it 's the fear of exposure chiefly that makes a poor sinner anxious to confess a fault, and sorry he committed it. Not a first-class conscience,—hardly the genuine, fast-color, warranted-not-to-fade article,—but 'jes' better than none at all,' as the old negro woman said of her husband. He 'll own up yet."

"I hope he will!" Fred exclaimed fervently.

"But I say, Melf!" cried Quimby, looking round upon the little glen into which they had descended. "You did n't tell me you kept a small private paradise here! A miniature Garden of Eden! This brook, these wooded banks and overarching boughs, the sunshine flickering through,—it 's perfectly exquizz'!"

"Glad you like it," said the young proprietor, well pleased.

"Like it," echoed the guest. "That 's no word for it. Where 's Adam? Seems to me he should be strolling around somewhere. This bench—little Cain and Abel might have sat here and counted their marbles, or played with their popguns, and

listened to the finches and the waterfalls, and quarreled, and been as happy as any children in the world, at that early period. There 's the infant Cain now,—or is it Abel?"

"It 's the little deaf-mute I told you about," said Melverton. "Over there is the parsonage side of the brook."

Quimby was regarding the child with intense curiosity.

"What an elf!" he exclaimed.

"I 'll show him to you," said Melverton, leading the way along the streamlet's edge.

At a spot where it gushed between two rocks, the child was stooping over a tiny water-wheel which the current kept whirling, while he dropped twigs and small sticks upon it, to see them flung off with the flying drops. He was unconscious of the voices and the feet approaching behind him, until the young men were quite near; then he turned with quick surprise and a bright laugh, as Fred crossed the brook and caught him up in his arms.

"He 's the precioucest little old man that ever was!" cried Fred, tossing him. "He knows his best friend!" as the child put out a tiny hand and smoothed the young man's cheek. "But think of



"FRED CROSSED THE BROOK AND CAUGHT HIM UP IN HIS ARMS."

it, Quimby! He can't hear a word, and never will in all his life!"

"The pity of it! The pity of it!" Quimby quoted, with a sincerity of feeling that betrayed a tender heart under all his gaiety. "Born so?"

"No. Scarlet fever. A terrible calamity. He's the only one who does n't realize it. You never saw a happier sprite. Curious, what compensations nature sometimes provides for our worst ills. Blessed himself, he's a blessing to all around him. Keeps the little trickling springs of affection open in their hearts, you know. I believe he's a source of deeper happiness to his mother than if he had all his five senses, like the other children."

There were bright tears in the young man's fine eyes as he held the child on his shoulder, clasping with one hand the little feet, and with the other arm hugging him close to his handsome head and manly neck.

"He must be a great care, though," said Quimby, looking into the child's laughing eyes, and studying their expression. "Mischievous, I fancy."

"He's in everything!" Fred replied. "Of course it's impossible to discipline him as you would another child. Conscientious — very — in his own way; but his notions of right and wrong

are sometimes strangely inverted, judged by our standards. If he wants a thing, he 'll have it, if he can get it; the desire is justification enough, to his unsophisticated conscience."

"Have they ever tried to teach him to speak by the modern methods of deaf-mute instruction?"

"Yes, but without much success. He won't even learn the printed or sign alphabet. The trouble is," said Fred, "he communicates too easily in a sign-language of his own. He is trying to tell us something now. What is it, Midget? That 's the name we can't help giving him, it fits him so exactly."

The child, carried in his arms along the brook-side, looked back up the stream, making earnest gestures, a quick, whirling movement of his little hand being one of them.

"Something about his water-wheel," Quimby observed, making a similar motion in return.

Midget nodded with pleasure, and, slipping from Fred's arms, ran back to the spot where he had left his wheel. This he removed from its support of two stakes, held it up laughingly, and made signs that were easy to interpret.

"He is afraid some accident may happen to it if he leaves it there," Fred remarked; "and he is

going to take it to the house. Let's see if I can make him do an errand for me."

As Midget came running back to him, Fred secured his attention, and, looking down into his bright little face, began to communicate with him in a way that surprised and amused Canton Quimby, who stood observing them, and endeavoring to read their language.

"He understands," Melverton said, as the child, with a final affirmative response, started to run up the bank toward the old parsonage.

"I understand, too,—some of your gestures, anyway," replied Quimby. "When you put up your hand,—like this,—you meant to ask for somebody as high as your necktie; but when you put it behind your ears, with a motion of cutting your head off, that bothered yours truly."

"I meant a person about that height, as you say, and with short hair. His mother is near Tracy's height, and his sister is almost as tall; but they have long hair. There's a young minister boarding in the house; but he is taller than Tracy. Midget told me his brother was at home; then I said, 'Find him, and bring him down here to see me.'

"That's nothing to the conversations his family

can carry on with him," Fred went on as they seated themselves on the bench by the brook. "It 's a very interesting family, as you will see; for I am going to introduce you to them some time, though not to-day."

CHAPTER XV

TRACY TRIUMPHANT



“**HERE** comes Tracy. He ’s a remarkably fine boy. The mother is a rare woman, but she finds it a hard struggle to get along, and it ’s a constant study with some of the well-to-do parishioners how to help the family without making them feel that they are objects of charity. Notice what a frank, engaging face he has!” Fred said, as Tracy, brightly smiling, came down the bank.

“How are you, Tracy?” he went on, when Tracy was nearer, and gave the new-comer a hearty handshake. “This is my friend, Mr. Canton Quimby, of Yale. We have just taken a run up from the beach to look at our place. What did Laurie tell you?”

“He said you were here, and a friend with you, not quite so tall, but a little stouter, and with

fuller cheeks," said Tracy, laughing to see how perfectly the Yale Junior answered the child's description.

"All that in his own sign-language?" Canton Quimby inquired with evident interest.

"Oh, yes; he has been more our teacher in that than any one has ever been his. Come up to the house, won't you? Mother will be glad to see you," said Tracy.

"I'm afraid we can't at present," Melverton replied; "but I've something to say to you here. Sit down, for it may be a long story."

But Tracy remained standing before the young men on the bench, while he heard from Fred's lips, with running comments by Quimby, an account of the strange doings on the Melverton premises, and of Gid's dismissal.

Astonishment at the loss of the cup, and the mystery attending it, and, as must be owned, the satisfaction of his grudge against Gideon, sent the blood mounting to the boy's head in keen excitement.

"I never had any faith in that Ketterell fellow!" he exclaimed; "and I was surprised —"

A timely recollection of his mother's warning checked the impetuous outburst; but for that he

might have gone on and given his latest, burning reasons for disliking Gideon.

"Surprised I should have employed him," Melverton rejoined. "I am a little surprised myself. But my mother thought we ought to give him a chance. And I surely believed he was honest. Mind, I don't say I 'm convinced to the contrary yet. He has unquestionably been negligent, and he may have been knowingly unfaithful, but we are bound to have a good deal of charity for the son of so worthy a mother—and of so unworthy a father!"

"That 's true," Tracy assented, generously; "that 's what mother says. Old man Ketterell can't be trusted even to collect money for the washing his wife does to support the family. Gid comes honestly by his shiftlessness."

"So we won't be hard on him," Fred went on. "But this affair must be looked into; and in the meanwhile, Tracy, can't you, as a special favor to me, keep your eye on the place, and perhaps air the house for us in fine weather?"

Tracy was delighted.

"I 'll do everything that Gid did,—or ought to have done,—and think it nothing but sport," he said, heartily.

"That 's altogether too much," the young man protested.

"Just let me try it!" cried the boy. "Our own garden does n't take more than a few hours a week, and Mr. Walworth likes to help about that. And—I shall be so glad to do the least thing in return for all the favors your family has done for us," he added, with grateful emotion.

"Oh, don't mention trifles of that sort!" Fred replied, with responsive feeling. Then he resumed: "It 's just possible you may pick up a clue that will lead to the unraveling of the mystery. Look out for any suspicious characters that come prowling about the place; and find out, if you can, any that have been seen there during Gid's administration. If you make any discoveries, send me at once a telegram that I and nobody else will understand, for I don't want any publicity given to the affair at present. I sha'n't mention it to a living soul, except the chief of police."

"Can I tell my own folks?" Tracy asked, thrilled to the roots of his hair by the confidence his friend reposed in him, and by the importance of his trust. It did n't seem possible that he could keep it all to himself.

"Tell them—oh, certainly; we can rely upon

their discretion," Fred replied. "Now come over to the house, and I'll give you the keys and explain matters."

"You're sure you can't just step up to the door and speak to my mother and Ida?" said Tracy.

But Fred answered firmly: "Not this time"; and led the way up the Melverton bank.

CHAPTER XVI

TRACY GETS A "CLUE"



"W^HY, what is it, Trace?" said Ida Lisle, noticing her brother's panting breath and gleaming eyes when he came in to dinner.

"The strangest things have been happening!" he exclaimed. "They 're not to be spoken of outside,"—he glanced around at the young minister coming out of his study—"but I can tell you all, here at home."

And, without waiting to be questioned, he broke forth impetuously:

"The Melverton house has been entered, Fred's beautiful prize cup has been stolen, Gid Ketterell has been turned off, and I am in charge!"

The exciting news was discussed as the family sat down at the table.

"I am sorry for Gideon—and so sorry for his mother!" said Mrs. Lisle. "I hope he is not suspected of taking the cup."

"WHY, WHAT IS IT, TRACE?" ASKED IDA LITTLE."



"Not exactly, but —"

And Tracy went over the circumstances of the case as well as he could recall them.

"Now I am to look after the place, and do what I can—if there 's anything I can do—toward clearing up the mystery. I have n't the slightest idea how I am to begin."

"Possibly I can give you a hint," suggested Mr. Walworth. "Gideon, I understand, says he received no one into the house in the absence of the family?"

"He was quite positive about that; so Fred told me," replied Tracy.

"I shall regret to contradict Gideon's testimony," rejoined the young minister. "You know the rock among the syringas, where I sometimes have my cushion, and my book, and my writing-pad—"

"Your out-door study, we call it," said Ida.

"Last Tuesday afternoon I was there, making some notes, when I noticed a young fellow coming down through the hollow by the brook. Something in his manner excited my curiosity; and I watched him as he went up rather slyly over the bank toward the Melverton house. I saw him throw something from behind the shrubbery; then I heard a voice,—two voices,—and he disappeared

in the direction of the house. I continued to hear the voices for a while, then they ceased with the shutting of the door. I had forgotten the circumstance, and was absorbed in my studies again, when—I hardly know how long after—I heard the same subdued voices, and shortly after saw the same young fellow come down over the bank, moving cautiously till he got into the ravine. Then, instead of going up the brook, the way he came, he followed it down toward the bridge, and I lost sight of him."

More than once during this recital Tracy had interrupted it to demand excitedly,—“Who was it? Who was the fellow?” and his sister had silenced him with, “Can’t you wait a minute? Can’t you let him tell his story?” At length the minister replied:

“I don’t know his name; but I have several times seen him, oftener on the river than anywhere else. Under the clump of willows, not far from where the brook flows in, somebody keeps a boat, which I have seen him help himself to, as if he had a right to it.”

“A muscular young fellow with a bend in his shoulders? Carries his head forward—like this?” cried Tracy eagerly.

"That 's it; that 's very like him," Mr. Walworth smilingly assented.

"It 's Osk! It 's Oscar Ordway!" Tracy exclaimed. "The very last fellow the Melvertons would wish to enter their house!"

"Mind, I don't say positively he did enter it," said the minister. "I 've only told you how it appeared to me."

"Of course Gid let him in," Tracy cried jubilantly. "You 've given me a very important point, Mr. Walworth. If Osk Ordway did n't drink some of that cider, and if he does n't know something about the missing cup, then there 's no sense in my knowledge-box!"

"Don't start out with the notion that there 's more sense in it than there really is," his sister warned him, laughingly. "There 's a limit even to that, as we all know."

"Oh, but anybody can see," cried her brother, "Osk is in it, and Gid knows he is. I know boys that know Osk, and I 'm going into this affair, to the very bottom."

"Don't be rash, my son," his mother cautioned him. "Whatever you do, be considerate, be discreet."

"Considerate?" echoed the boy, in a flush of

high spirits. "I'm the most considerate, the most discreet—I'll prove it to you! In all my talk with Fred Melverton, I never mentioned the mean trick Gid played our Laurie, nor his impudent attempt to drive me from the place. If that does n't show forbearance!"

"Well, be as circumspect in everything, and I shall be satisfied," said his mother. "Why, Laurie! where have you been?" she cried, precisely as if the child, who just then came running in, had possessed the sense he lacked.

There had been inquiries for Midget as the family were sitting down to dinner; but he was so wayward a little wanderer, often very hard to find, since no calling could make him hear, that they gave little heed to his absences, assured that he would reappear when he was hungry, if not before.

He was in a joyous mood, and he had a merry tale to tell, which all except the minister understood.

"Somebody has taken him to ride," said his sister.

"On a bicycle," added Tracy, reading the child's rapid gestures. "There were two bicycles; they picked him up at the bridge—"

"Gave him a fine ride to the village," Ida struck in, "and dropped him at the bridge again."

"Fred and his friend," concluded Tracy; "it was Fred who gave him the ride. They were going to see the chief of police."

"You don't mean to say he tells you *that*!" said Mr. Walworth.

"Oh, no, not about Fred's errand to the village," Tracy replied. "Fred told me that was his intention. I wish I could have caught him when he came back to the bridge, to tell him about Osk Ordway. For it's a clue!" he cried, "decidedly a clue, and I'm going to follow it up!"

CHAPTER XVII

GIDEON MEETS HIS FOE



WHEN Gid Ketterell went out from the Melverton place after his dismissal, he took the brookside path below the bridge, and strode as straight as the winding way would permit to the clump of willows by the river, where Osk Ordway usually kept his boat.

The boat was gone.

"He 's off with the boys somewheres," Gid muttered, casting impatient glances up and down the placid stream out of his reddened and sullen eyes. "Never mind; I don't move from this spot, all the same, till he comes in!"

There was a tree that pushed out so straight from the group, before its top and branches curved upward over the water, that it made a saddle-shaped seat. This Gid bestrode; and with a large limb at his back, forming an upright support, he found

himself in a comfortable position while waiting for the boat.

Comfortable as to his body, but by no means so as to his state of mind. Savagely angry with Osk, whom he blamed for his disgrace, and for the terrible suspicion that had fallen upon him; almost as angry with himself for having weakly yielded to Osk's influence after he had been warned against it; afraid to go home and fall into the hands of his mother — agitated with these emotions he took no thought of the quaint and gnarly old easy-chair he sat on, nor of the pleasant, sun-flecked shade flung over and about him, on the stream and on the shore, from the long willow-boughs swinging in the breeze.

The breeze fanned his hot brow; the water rippled and sparkled in the sun; bees and dragonflies hovered over the water-lilies and pickerel-weeds, and butterflies flitted along the shore. Turtles were sunning themselves on a half-sunken log, and a kingfisher, springing his rattle as he flew from a tree near by, poised a moment in the air, and then struck the wave with a splash. But Gid Ketterell saw none of these things. He took out his knife, and began to whittle the trunk on which he sat, in the bark of which many a pre-

vious jack-knife had carved the rude initials of names he knew.

He was not even aware that he had a knife in his hand. Behind his screen of boughs he listened for voices, and looked up and down the shore for the returning boat, thinking intently of the bad things that had happened to him, what he ought to have done differently, and what he was still to do and say when he and Osk should meet once more face to face. He hoped that would happen soon, before he had time to get over his anger; for it was anger alone, as he very well knew, that gave him courage for the encounter.

"If I had only owned when I had a chance!" he said to himself. "Why did n't I? I'd have done it, if I had n't been afraid and ashamed to say how I had let him impose on me—forcing his way in, making me show him the cup, and drinking the cider. Now see where I am! After I'd begun to lie, I could n't go back. Telling the truth could n't have made it any worse for me; I should have got turned off just the same. I could stand that. But to be blamed for what Osk did afterward! For it was Osk—I know it was Osk!"

He was musing in this way, though not in so many words, when he heard voices and the clank

of oars, and presently saw Osk's boat coming around a bend. Osk was in the stern, steering, and a boy about Gid's own age was rowing, with his back turned toward the clump of willows.

"It 's Dord Oliver," Gideon said, as he peered through the branches with fierce eyes. "I'll wait till he gets out of the way. You may laugh, Osk Ordway, but 't will be out of t' other side of your mouth when I tackle you!"

The voices were pitched in a low key, but sounds pass easily over the water, and soon Gid could hear parts of the conversation. The sound of his own name, uttered by Osk with a derisive titter, was like the sting of a hornet. "They're talking about me!" he muttered, holding himself stiff and still against the upright trunk to keep from being seen.

Dord made some reply, but the words were indistinguishable. Then Osk said:

"Oh, yes, you can; he 's one of the sort you can do almost anything with; you can wind him around your little finger—at least, I can! Only don't tell him I said I had seen it; he made me promise not to."

"They're talking about the cup!" thought Gid, stunned and breathless. He listened again, as the boat drew nearer.

"I 'm afraid you won't get any cider," said Osk; "for there was only one more bottle left. I left that for manners. But you can make him show you—mind, I don't say what."

If he meant the cup, he was talking as if he believed it was still in the place where he had seen it. Gid was bewildered by this supposed assumption on the part of the suspected thief, until he had rallied his wits a little.

Meanwhile the boys ran the boat aground, and began to throw out fish, which they counted as they cast them on the shore.

"It 's all make-believe," Gid reasoned. "He thinks it 's time for the cup to be missed. He knows I 'll accuse him, and he talks that way so he can bring up a witness to prove that he thought it was still in the house. But he can't throw dust in my eyes—not very much!"

By turning his head a little and looking back he could watch every movement of the others; while they might likewise have seen him if they had not been so busy with their catch of fish. After they had thrown these out and had stepped out themselves, they made the boat fast to a stake, within three paces of the ambushed Gideon.

"You divide 'em, while I 'm cutting twigs to

"WHEN HE TALKING ABOUT ME," HE MUTTERED.



string 'em on," said Osk, looking up into the willow branches, and advancing directly toward Gid on the other side of his upright tree. He was raising his hand to reach the hanging branches beyond. "Ough!" he ejaculated, starting back as if he had chanced upon a wild Indian in ambush. "What in thunder — Gid!"

Gid turned upon him angrily glowering eyes.

"What 's the matter with you?" Osk demanded, quickly recovering from his surprise — "stuck here in the crotch of the tree!"

For sole response Gid continued to glare at him threateningly. Osk perceived at once that some untoward thing had happened. No doubt Gid had overheard his talk with Dord; well if it were nothing worse!

"Here 's Gid Ketterell," cried Osk, "glum as an oyster. I can't get a word out of him."

"Osk Ordway," said Gid, without moving from his seat, but keeping his fiery eyes on the author of his woes, "you 'll get words out of me you won't like to hear, before we part company. I can wait until you string your fish and let Dord get out of the way; for I guess you 'll think it 's as well to talk with me alone!"

CHAPTER XVIII

OSK ORDWAY'S LITTLE FINGER



ALL this Gid said without faltering, but a spasmodic catching of his breath made his voice sound ominously thick and tremulous.

"Thunder and Mars!" Osk exclaimed. "I never saw you so mad in all my life. I did n't know you *could* be so riled! If it's anything I've done, I'll make it all right."

"Oh, yes!" Gid retorted. "I know you will. I'm one of the sort you can do anything with! — wind me around your little finger, can you? We'll see about that!"

"That was all in fun," Osk said, trying to turn off his embarrassment with a laugh. "I'll see you in a minute."

He cut two or three forked branches, and turned to his companion on the shore.

"That's all right, Dord," he said, seeing how the

fish had been divided. "Take whichever pile you please, and don't wait for me. I've got to have a little row with Gid here," lowering his voice; "he 's pudgicky about something,—what I was saying to you, I suppose. Keep dark about that thing, Dord!"

Osk busied himself stringing his own fish until Dord was gone, then turned once more to Gid, who got down from the tree-trunk and stood confronting him.

"Now what is it, Gid?" Osk asked in the friendliest way.

"You know what it is!" Gid flung back, his quivering features charged with wrathful reproach.

"My talk with Dord, I suppose," said Osk. "But I don't see anything in that to raise your porcupine's quills at me this way. A fellow must have his joke. That 's all it was."

"It ain't that, and you know it," replied the implacable Gid.

He still grasped his knife, looking as if he might easily be tempted to turn it into a weapon. Osk kept a wary eye on the blade.

"Why, Gid, you 're out o' your head! you 're crazy, sure!" he said, taking a step backward.

"You 'll find out whether I 'm crazy or not,"

said Gid, growing more bold and menacing as Osk showed a disposition to retreat. But as he advanced, Osk stopped with a fire in his eyes, and put up a warning hand.

"Quit right there, Gid!" he said, with his chin out and his head thrust insolently forward from his bent shoulders. "I ain't going to stand this nonsense—talking to me that way and threatening me! Put up that knife or I 'll throw it into the river,—and you after it."

"Better try it!" Gid answered, defiantly. "I 'll talk as I please, spite of your bluster and pretended ignorance. I 've been turned off by Fred Melverton,—kicked out,—and all through you, Osk Ordway!"

"You don't say!" Osk exclaimed. "I never believed that would happen, and I 'm awful sorry. Did he miss the cider?"

"Yes; and he missed something else, Osk Ordway!" Gid leveled at him a terrible look. Osk turned pale—so at least Gid thought, as he put the question Fred had put to him,—“Where is that prize cup?"

"That prize cup!" Osk repeated, with real or feigned astonishment. "You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do mean! The prize cup I was fool

enough to show you, and you were dishonest enough to steal!" said Gideon.

"You don't say *that* has been taken! You left it in the drawer; I saw you," Osk said rather weakly, as it seemed to Gid.

"And nobody else saw me," Gid retorted. "Nobody else knew where to look for it. The cider and the cup are the only things Fred has missed. You know about the cider and you know about the cup."

"Did you tell him that?" Osk inquired quickly.

"No, I did n't. But I wish I had. I had denied touching the cider, or letting anybody into the house. Then when he said the cup had been taken, I could n't go back on my word. I wish now I had," Gid repeated, with bitter self-reproach.

He related all that had happened in his interview with Fred, and again charged Osk with the robbery. Osk laughed scornfully.

"The idea of my doing such a thing as that!" he exclaimed. "You don't really think I did, Gid Ketterell. For my part," he went on, without listening to Gid's indignant protestation, "I don't believe the cup has been stolen. I don't take any stock in that story. Fred Melverton is bluffing you. He took it out of the drawer himself, to

give you a good scare, after he found out about the cider."

"You think so?" Gid replied, shaken by the plausible argument, and grasping at that straw of hope.

"No doubt of it," said Osk. "Fred says to himself, he says, 'Two bottles of cider gone,' he says; 'he 's had somebody in the house, and now I 'll teach him a lesson.' See?"

"No, I don't see!" Gid muttered. He was, however, more than half convinced that Osk was right, and he wished to be wholly convinced. "I don't believe he'd have made a fuss about the cider, if that had been all he missed; he ain't that kind of a chap. Anyhow, it 's all through you I 've lost the place."

"You 'll get taken back again," Osk assured him. "Only stick to your story, and soon as he sees you 're not to be beat out of it, he 'll conclude he 's in the wrong."

"The cup is all I care for," Gid murmured, his anger fast giving way before the wily influence of his betrayer. "If I could only think it was the way you say!"

"I 'll bet my life on it!" Osk declared. "Keep still about it, and you never 'll hear from it again. As for the place, I 'm sorry; but even if you don't

go back, you 'll have a better time this summer than if you 'd kept it; you 'd have soon got sick of all that."

"I suppose I should," Gid admitted; "but what will my mother say when she knows?"

"She need n't know," said Osk. "You can go off every day just as if you were going to Melverton's, and have all your time to yourself. Would n't she like some of these fish? I 'll give you some to carry home; they 'll please her, and keep her from noticing anything strange in your looks. Then I 've got some schemes to let you into. You know we 've always had good times together, Gid."

"But why did you talk about me that way to Dord Oliver?" said Gid, with a last feeble flaming up of his waning resentment. "You told him about my showing the cup."

"I never mentioned the cup! It was all talk, anyway; a fellow must say something. You know, you and I are always good cronies," said Osk, completing again the process, which he had boasted was so easy, of winding Gid around his little finger.

CHAPTER XIX

TRACY LISLE AND DORD OLIVER



RACY LISLE entered upon his new duties with a satisfaction to which a feeling of triumph over Gideon gave a peculiar zest. He laughed as he handled the hose with which Midget had been sprinkled and he himself had been threatened, saying to himself:

“He told me never to set foot on these grounds as long as he was in charge; and I said, ‘You won’t always be in charge.’”

He wondered a little that the prophecy had so unexpectedly come true. Meanwhile it was a pure delight to see Midget playing about the place, free and happy, and enjoying, in his own silent way, the new order of things. The child, who had always been accustomed to run in and out of the house at pleasure when the Melvertons were at home, would have taken similar liberties in their

absence if Tracy had not rigorously kept him out.

So, before going in himself that afternoon to close the windows and pull down the shades, he sent the little deaf-mute home, promising to follow soon. He had carefully put everything in order, and was about lowering the shade of a back chamber window, when he saw something like a human figure moving behind the vines of the trellis framed against the side of the barn.

"Why, is that Midget?" he said to himself. "Has n't he gone home yet?"

But it was n't Midget; a much larger form appeared at an opening of the vines, a head nodded, and a hand made signs to Tracy.

"It 's George Oliver!" he said. "What can he want of me?"

The two boys were about the same age, and were on good terms enough, but not so intimate as they had once been, the Oliver boy consorting too much with the idle and reckless sort to be, in Mrs. Lisle's opinion, a fit companion for her precious son; in the opinion also, we may add, of the precious son himself.

"He never would have come here for me," Tracy reflected. "He must think Gid Ketterell is still in

charge; he is after Gid,"—his conclusion being that George Oliver had seen, but had not recognized, him through the window. "I 'll ask what he wants, and maybe find out something else;" for he had been all the afternoon in a study as to which of the associates of Gid and Osk he should approach in order to follow up the clue given him by Mr. Walworth.

He was undoubtedly right as to George Oliver's object in visiting the place. George appeared very much surprised to see Tracy coming out of the back door presently, locking it, and walking straight to the trellis.

"Hello, Dord!" said Tracy, smiling diplomatically.

Young Oliver had at first thought of taking himself unceremoniously out of the way; but though he might easily have avoided an interview, there was not time for him to escape recognition. So he concluded to remain and face Master Lisle with as confident an air as he could assume upon short notice.

"Hello, Tracy!" he replied, smiling in his turn, but somewhat glassily. "I did n't know it was you."

"Well, it happens to be," said Tracy, with engaging suavity. "Sorry I 'm not the one you wanted."

"That 's of no consequence," Dord replied. "I thought Gid Ketterell —"

"Gid went off some little time ago. Can't you make use of me in his place?" said Tracy. "You know you and I used to be pretty good friends, Dord."

"Yes; I always did like you, Tracy," Dord answered honestly, pleased at the turn the talk was taking. "We don't see much of each other, lately, though."

"No," said Tracy; "and I wonder whose fault it is."

Poor as the Lises were, since the minister's death, they stood high in the respect of the village people, and likewise in their own esteem. Tracy, as he grew up, saw more and more the propriety — insisted on by his mother — of keeping a certain class of boys at a distance. This independence on his part they resented by calling him "stuck-up" and "big-feeling." They might have conceded his right to keep apart from them if the Lises had been wealthy, like the Melvertons; but as it was, his assumption of superiority was deemed offensive.

"I don't see how it can be my fault," said Dord. Then, in a burst of candor, "Fact is, Tracy, I have n't thought I was quite 'ristocratic enough for you."

As he said this he turned very red, and looked as if he feared he had wounded Tracy's sensibilities. Tracy colored, too, but maintained his smiling countenance. All this time they stood within the vine-covered trellis, with the afternoon sunshine slanting in, and flickering upon them through the leaves.

"I'm glad you spoke so plainly, George," Tracy replied, without betraying the least resentment. "For now perhaps we can come to a better understanding. I *am* aristocratic, in one sense. But you know it is n't because I have money, or dress particularly well, or —"

"I know that," Dord hastened to admit, with an air of apology. "Money and good clothes have n't much to do with it."

"What has, then? Come, Dord!" said Tracy. "Speak right out! I'll promise you that I sha'n't be offended."

Leaning an elbow in a diamond of the trellis, and resting on one foot, with the other thrown up carelessly on the toe behind it, he regarded Dord ingratiatingly. Dord stood before him, with his hands in his pockets, his eyes cast down, and his russet cheeks drawn with a grin of comical embarrassment.



“‘COME, DORD!’ SAID TRACY. ‘SPEAK RIGHT OUT!’”

"You don't dare tell me!" Tracy urged coaxingly. "Come, Dord!"

After a pause Dord lifted his eyes and, looking straight into Tracy's with a frank expression, replied:

"You 're a better fellow than the rest of us; that 's just where it is, Tracy. You 're a better fellow than the rest of us."

Tracy was touched; his brave blue eyes glistened as he answered:

"Oh, now, see here, Dord, what do you mean by that? I'm no such good fellow as you think. I've got a high temper, I can be as selfish and jealous as anybody, and I'm constantly saying and doing things I'm ashamed of, or sorry for, afterward."

"If you were pretty mean you would n't be ashamed of 'em," Dord suggested, with a shy look out of the corner of his eyes.

"Something in that!" said Tracy, with a gay little laugh. "But what I'm coming to is this. "It's the good heart that makes one fellow really better than another; and there is n't a better-hearted boy in town than you, Dord Oliver! There is n't one I'd sooner go to for a genuine, down-right, disinterested kindness. Do you believe it?"

It was Dord's turn to feel happy and grateful

now. He winked quickly as he leaned back against the trellis, with his head turned half away, and said in a low voice:

"I do mean right! But I don't know how it is — you 're brighter 'n the rest of us; that 's the difference."

"Heigho!" said Tracy, with something between a laugh and a sigh, as he took a step toward him, across the overarched space. "'Brighter'?" You know yourself, Dord Oliver, that in school you were as bright at your lessons as I was,—when you tried. If you had kept on and entered the high school, instead of dropping out as you did, you might be as far along as I am. So might several of the boys, who got tired of study, and imagined they had education enough. Is n't that so?"

"Maybe 't is," Dord assented, with a sorry nod.

"No!" cried Tracy. "It is n't that, either, that makes me aristocratic—if I *am* aristocratic—and I hope I am, in the right way. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"I 'd like to know," Dord replied earnestly, as Tracy paused.

"It is because I try to make the best of myself. That 's why I keep away from boys that hold themselves too cheap. I can't afford to idle away

my time as they do, caring only for the fun of the moment. Something won't let me. I *must* improve my mind—get knowledge—prepare myself for whatever may be before me in life. When I read about great and noble men, I can't help comparing myself with them, and trying to be like them. Our youth is too precious to be trifled away. I believe in enjoying it as we go along, but in a different way from those that find it so dull without coarse excitements. If that is what makes me aristocratic," Tracy went on, "why, then I 'm glad I am aristocratic."

Dord stared at him with astonishment akin to awe.

"I don't wonder you keep away from us," he replied.

"Don't you ever have such feelings?" Tracy inquired.

"Yes—I suppose every fellow has—odd spells. I only wish I could live up to 'em, as you do!" Dord declared, sincerely. "But it 's so much easier to go off and have a good time!"

"Yes," said Tracy; "and the right kind of a good time is something I believe in, too. I enjoy it as much as anybody. But you fellows want to make life *all* a good time. You 've got to go to

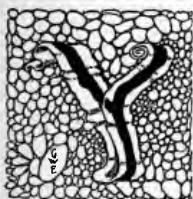
work before long, and you ought to be interested in that work. Then suppose you give a part of your leisure to serious reading and thinking — say, an hour or two a day; have you any idea what a difference it would make in the course of a year? three years? ten years? I think, Dord, if you should try that, you would begin to feel ‘aristocratic’ yourself; you would be a little more choice of your spare time and of the company you keep.”

“That ’s so!” said the conscience-smitten Dord.
“I guess that ’s so.”

Then there was a long pause, Tracy wondering how he should approach the subject that was uppermost in his mind when he had come to meet Dord.

CHAPTER XX

FOLLOWING UP THE "CLUE"



YOU were coming here to find Gid Ketterell," Tracy at last said.

"Yes; I thought it was about time for him to be going along home, and I'd go with him," Dord replied, after a little hesitation.

"You've been here for him before?"

"No, never once."

"Do you know of anybody who has?" Tracy inquired.

"I don't know as I ought to tell," said Dord; for he, like almost all the village boys, and some of their parents and teachers too, I regret to say, was in the habit of saying "don't know *as*" for "don't know *that*," and using other incorrect expressions of which fastidious mothers like Mrs. Lisle disapproved.

"If there is any good honest reason why you

should n't tell, don't," said Tracy, studying him with kind, searching eyes. "But I have a very good and a very honest reason for asking the question." He concluded he had better come frankly to the point. "You can help me about a very important matter, Dord, if you will."

"I should like to do that," said Dord.

"Then tell me who has been here to see Gid."

"Osk Ordway has; I don't know of any others."

"When was that?" Tracy asked, with quickening heart-beats.

"I don't know; just two or three days ago."

"What did he want?"

"Nothing particular, I guess," Dord answered, evasively.

Tracy thought it time for him to take a bold stand.

"He wanted something, and he got something; and you know it, Dord. And you wanted something to-day. Was it cider?"

Dord gave a sheepish sort of laugh.

"I guess there wa'n't" (*wa'n't* for *was n't* was another of his incorrect words) "much of any cider left."

"I should n't suppose there would be, after Osk Ordway had had a taste of it," Tracy observed.

"That 's so!" said Dord. "I wa'n't after cider."

"What then? You ought to tell me," Tracy insisted.

"Osk told me Gid would show me something, and I thought it might be Fred Melverton's prize cup," Dord replied. "But I could n't make him say so."

"Dord!" Tracy exclaimed, "this is very important—what you are saying to me. Now I am going to tell you something—a most astonishing thing that has happened—in strictest confidence. You won't speak of it till I give you leave."

Dord gave the required promise, and listened wonderingly.

"That prize cup has been stolen!"

"It hain't!" said Dord, not by way of contradiction, but as an expression of his intense amazement. "Hain't" was another of his words.

"You 're a lucky fellow, Dord," said Tracy.

"I don't see how—" began Dord.

"Why, that you did n't come here and get Gid to show *you* the cup before it was stolen. Don't you see? *You* might have become an object of suspicion."

Dord's face grew flushed and damp.

"And let me advise you," Tracy continued, "if

you have any sort of connection or understanding with Osk, to wash your hands of it at once. Just what did he tell you?"

"About the cup? He did n't call it by name," Dord replied. "He only said Gid had shown him something in the Melverton house, and that I could make him show it to me. That was all. I thought it must be that; for, before that, we had talked about Fred's winning the prize."

"It *was* that!" Tracy assured him. "Osk is mixed up in the business—the robbery, to speak it plainly—and he meant to mix you up."

"I can't believe it! I thought Osk—" Dord faltered incredulously.

"You thought better of Osk than that. I can't say whether I did or not. His visit to the house that day was as secret as possible; I happen to know about that," Tracy declared, triumphantly. "That Gid let him in I am as sure as I am that Gid denied it afterwards. Very soon after that—perhaps that very day—the cup disappeared. Gid vows he knows nothing about it. He also says he knows nothing about the cider that was taken."

"Did he say that?" cried Dord. He seemed about to add more, but stopped, fearing perhaps he had already said things that might complicate matters for Gid.

"Don't mince it!" said Tracy. "Did n't Osk brag to you that he drank cider in the house? You said as much before."

"Yes, he did," Dord was forced to admit.

"Then what can we think of Gid's denials?" Tracy demanded.

"I don't know what to think," Dord replied. "But here 's one thing. If Osk took the cup, or knew it had been taken, why should he put me up to come and ask to see it?"

"To mix you up in it, as I told you. Or for any other reason. It does n't deceive me. And you, Dord — candidly, now! — don't you see I 've good reason for believing Osk took the cup?"

"Yes," Dord avowed. "And you 'd have a still better reason if you knew something I know."

"What 's that?" Tracy asked, so very eagerly that Dord became alarmed.

"I guess I 'd better not tell; it 's something I had n't ought to have mentioned."

"How! something you ought n't to have mentioned?" Tracy questioned, unconsciously correcting Dord's language in repeating it. "I 'll tell you this, Dord Oliver; it 's always better, in a matter of this sort, to meet it squarely and make a clean record for yourself. You don't help a wrong-doer

by keeping back anything that must come out; and you may be injuring yourself, you know."

"'T ain't anything that 'll hurt me if I tell it," said Dord; "and I don't suppose it will hurt Osk — not if he 's all right."

"Of course not! that 's the point," said Tracy. "But if he ought to be exposed, he will be; and you don't want to pass for one who has knowingly covered up his misdeeds. Now Dord!"

Dord had backed up against the trellis, as Tracy followed and urged him; he could now retreat no farther, nor escape in any direction, Tracy holding him fast, with both hands on his shoulders, and confronting him with a determined smile.

"I 'd jest as lieves tell; I don't know why I should n't," said Dord. "Two or three nights ago — Tuesday night, I 'm pretty sure — I was on the street with the Sweeney boys, when we saw Osk come out of Elkins's orchard; he got over the wall and started to cross over to the street his gran'sir lives on."

"I know; Mr. Pudgwick — Maple street," said Tracy.

"He was carrying something under his coat, which we might not have noticed," Dord continued, "if it had n't bothered him in getting over the

wall. Just as he was getting down to the sidewalk, he seemed to see us coming around the corner by the harness-shop. He hesitated a little, then jumped down and started to cross over, as I said; appearing not to notice us though it was bright moonlight."

"What time of night was this?" Tracy inquired.

He had taken his hands from Dord's shoulders, but still stood facing him, listening with intense interest to every word of his story.

"A little after nine; between nine and half-past," replied Dord. "We ran after Osk, and overtook him, and the first thing Dick Sweeney said was:

"'Hullo, Osk! What ye got there?'

"'There? Where?' says Osk.

"'Under your coat-flap,' says Dick.

"'Oh! that?' says Osk. 'That 's a bullhead I ketched up here in the river.'

"'Funny place to carry it, under your coat, wrapped up in your handkerchief,' Dick says; for we ketched a glimpse of something white. It was only Dick's guess that it was a handkerchief."

"What did he say to that?" Tracy questioned with excited eagerness.

"Something about a fellow having a right to carry fish in his own fashion. Then he got away

from us as soon as he could ; and the last we saw of him," said Dord, "he turned into his gran'sir Pudgwick's gate, and went around to the shed door."

"And what did you boys think?" Tracy asked.

"We did n't swallow the fish," Dord replied, with a grin. "He never 'd have made such a mystery of a horned pout ketched in the river. But I had no idea, till now, what it might really be."

Tracy hurriedly put the question :

"What 's your idea now?"

"Seems as if it must have been—well, I 'd rather not say."

"There 's no need of expressing an opinion," cried Tracy, gratified beyond measure. "Do you believe it was a handkerchief you saw, or—the thing itself?"

"Should n't wonder if it was the thing itself," Dord replied. "'T was just a glimpse we got of something light-colored under his dark coat-flap."

"Will the Sweeney boys remember about it?"

"I should say so! We talked it over enough on our way home, after Osk left us."

Then Dord told of the meeting between Gid and Osk under the willows.

"It was n't what Osk had been saying to you,

and Gid may have overheard, that made the trouble," Tracy declared; "at least, not that alone. I'll wager the stolen cup was at the bottom of it."

"'T was something pretty serious, anyway," said Dord; "for Gid appeared awful cut up; I never saw him look so black."

"Dord," exclaimed Tracy, "you've no idea how important all this is. Say nothing of it to anybody, till I report the whole thing to Fred Melverton."

"I hope I sha'n't get dragged into any scrape," said Dord.

"You won't, if what you tell me is true, I promise you."

"But I don't want to get Osk's ill-will," said Dord uneasily.

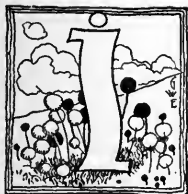
"I know that won't be pleasant," said Tracy; "but I've no doubt it will be much better for you than his good-will. Osk Ordway's bad influence over boys in this village has got to be put down; and I think this thing is going to do it. Now, take my advice, Dord," Tracy continued earnestly; "keep away from him and his gang. As for Gid Ketterell, you need n't come here for him any more; he has been turned off on account of the robbery."

Dord was greatly surprised. "His mother did n't know. I stopped at his house," he said, "on my way over, thinking he might have gone home early. She said he had been home to dinner, and gone back again — that I would find him here."

"Gid seems to be weaving rather a tangled web," Tracy suggested,— "he and Osk Ordway. Now, thanks to you, Dord, I think I 've a chance to unravel it."

CHAPTER XXI

TRACY'S TELEGRAM



BELIEVE I have tracked the fox to his den."

This was the ten-word despatch which Tracy wired to Fred Melverton that evening; and it brought Fred up from the seaside again early the next forenoon.

Fred was accompanied by his friend Canton Quimby, as before; they came sailing into the Melverton place so swiftly and silently, on their pneumatic tires, that Tracy, who was kneeling in the flower-beds, was hardly aware of their approach until they sprang off upon the walk close behind him.

He rose and turned quickly, and saw them standing there, radiant with health and gay spirits, each beside his wheel.

"Well, Trace, we 're here," said Melverton, laughing.

"I see you are!" Tracy replied, recovering from his surprise. "You 're not exactly a pair of seraphs, but if you had dropped down out of the sky you could n't have come upon me more suddenly."

He stood blushing before them, handsome but embarrassed, conscious of fingers soiled from the pulling of weeds about the roots of the plants, and awkwardly unpresentable for hand-shaking.

"I never meant you should do this sort of work, Trace!" Fred exclaimed, leaning his wheel against the piazza steps.

"It 's the one thing Gid Ketterell did n't do, and the one thing that needs to be done," Tracy made answer. "Did you get my telegram?"

"Did I get it?" echoed Fred. "It gave me such a start, I nearly upset the tea-table."

And his friend Canton Quimby added, "It was all I could do to keep him from hopping on his bike and scooting up here last evening; it was only by promising I would come with him this morning. We 're fox-hunting!"

"That is, if I understand just what you meant by the fox," said Melverton. "If you have tracked *that* —"

"That 's just what I have done," said Tracy, confidently.

He went on to relate, rapidly but circumstantially, the discoveries he had made, through Mr. Walworth and George Oliver; Fred listening with delighted approval, both of Tracy's tact in the affair and of his shrewd conclusions. At the close, Canton Quimby, who was always finding spheres of usefulness for his friends, remarked pointedly:

"Don't consider me impertinent, young man, but allow me to inform you that you have a career before you. You are a born detective. I advise you to take it up as a biz."

"Thank you!" Tracy replied with a laugh, not in the least displeased. "A little amateur work is all I should ever care to do in that line, and that only to oblige a friend. I fairly stumbled upon this, without much credit to myself."

"You 've worked it up with admirable address and discretion," Fred declared.

"But the fox is n't caught yet," Tracy suggested, aglow with modest pleasure.

"No, but we 'll have him out of his den, I warrant!" said Fred, with enthusiasm. "I know this fellow's folks, Osk Ordway's grandparents,"—turning to Canton Quimby. "Honest old people as ever lived. Their daughter made a runaway match—eloped with a music-teacher, whom they

and everybody except her knew to be an unprincipled adventurer. After two or three years she came home with broken health and bringing this boy. She died, and left him to the care of her parents. They have had no end of trouble trying to bring him up in the way he should go."

"And the boy's father?" Quimby inquired.

"The last I heard of him he was in trouble for drawing money on a forged check somewhere in Colorado. He has never done anything for his son's support. The boy just preys upon his grandparents, who can neither govern him nor turn him out of doors. The old man has got him out of several bad scrapes; he vows each time he will never help him out of another. I think we'd better lose no time in following up this trail."

"That 's my opin'," Quimby replied. "Take it while it 's fresh."

"Do you want me to go with you to find Dord Oliver, and get him to tell his story to you?" Tracy asked.

"No," said Fred; "I've no doubt you have reported it correctly. We can call him as a witness later. And we'll leave Gideon for the present. Osk Ordway is our game."

Then, leaving Tracy to await developments, the

young men leaped upon their wheels, and sped away down the road in the direction of the village.

As they approached Maple Street, Fred pointed out to his companion the small brown house where Osk lived with his grandparents, and said to him:

"Now we separate. I'll run down to the house, and get a chance, if I can, to interview the old grandfather alone; I believe I see him in his garden. In the meantime, you ride on to the police headquarters, and lay the whole thing before the chief—the officer I introduced you to the other day."

"Yesterday," Canton Quimby suggested.

"Was it no longer ago than that? How an exciting event crowds the sense of time!" Fred exclaimed, and then he added, "I'd better not be seen visiting the police with you; the fox might take alarm."

"I understand. I am to consult the chief, and to have him and his machinery ready for emergencies," said Quimby in a business-like way. "Then what?"

"Then ride back, and pass leisurely to and fro before the house, once or twice, or until I give you a signal. Say twenty minutes or half an hour from now. I'll be in sight somewhere."

So saying, Fred Melverton turned down a street that ran parallel to Maple street, and, making a swift detour, again approached the house of the grandparents from the other side.

XXII

GRAN'SIR PUDGWICK



OSK ORDWAY'S grandfather (or "gran'sir," as Osk and others called him) was a house- and sign-painter, who had so far retired from business that he employed his activities—which in his advanced age and portly condition were not great—chiefly in the care of his cow and his garden, his poultry and his pigs. He had a ponderous person, a big bald head, a smooth-shaven face, and a three-story chin.

He was at work that morning hoeing his sweet corn in a little patch beside the house, when young Mr. Melverton alighted from his bicycle at the gate, and walked toward him.

"Good morning, Mr. Pudgwick!" said Fred, tracking the freshly stirred earth between the rows.

"Your corn looks well."

"Passable, passable," said the old man, holding

his hoe-handle with one hand, while with the other he lifted his tattered straw hat—not to salute his visitor, but to admit the cooling breath of heaven to the dewy expanse of white scalp which he uncovered. At the same time the triple chin became quadruple as he settled it on his immense chest. “Well enough,” he added, “considering who the gardener is.”

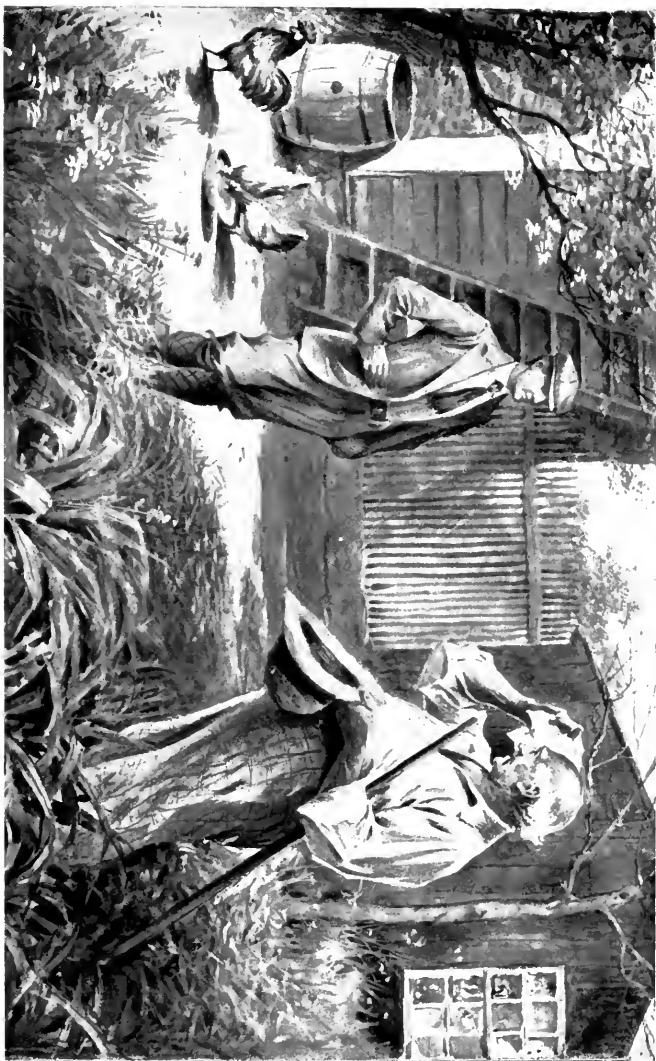
The big man, by the way, had so small a voice, that it seemed as if there must have been a little man somewhere inside him who did the talking.

“You take care of it yourself, I see; and it speaks well for the gardener,” remarked Fred, his fine face and athletic figure, as he stood there, tall, handsome, erect, in his trim bicycle suit, presenting a curious contrast to unwieldy old Gran’sir Pudgwick, in his baggy pantaloons and coarse shirt open at the throat.

The piping voice in the huge bulk made answer:

“I do about all the taking care of it that it gets. And I am seventy-six and scant of breath, and it jest about kills me to stoop, and quite kills me to get up again once I am down.”

There was a humorous twinkle in the small eyes that looked out from the coarse features, as he added:



"HE LIFTED HIS TATTERED STRAW HAT."

"I don't have to lift quite all creation when I rise up, but it 's a pretty good lump of it. It 's some years since I got too heavy to resk myself with a paint-pot on a ladder."

"What does that strapping grandson of yours do?" Fred inquired. "I should think he would help you in the garden."

"That 's what any one would think; any one that did n't know him," replied Gran'sir Pudgwick.

"Is n't he any more industrious than he used to be?" Fred continued.

"Any more *what?*" cried Gran'sir Pudgwick, with grimly humorous surprise. "I never heard *that* term applied to him in any degree. The only way for me to get work out of him is to hire him at exorbitant wages; then he quits soon as ever he gets a little money to spend."

Fred had got the conversation started in the right direction, and he pursued it.

"He is entirely dependent on you, is n't he?" he inquired.

"That 's the general impression," said Gran'sir Pudgwick. "I feed him, lodge him, clothe him; and I 've sent him to school as long as he could be got to go. But it seems to be his opinion that *I* 'm dependent on *him*. He 's master of the house;

I 'm only his steward, and I 'm wrongfully keeping back money that should be turned over to him."

"That 's a strange condition of things," Fred answered. "You have everything in your own hands; why don't you bring him to terms by putting him on a short allowance? Show him that you are master of the situation."

"I 've threatened it and I 've tried it. But he 's got one thing you don't take into account."

"What 's that?" Fred queried.

"A gram'er!" said the old man, bringing his hoe down beside a hill of corn with a smart slap.

Fred was puzzled to imagine what advantage any sort of a grammar could be to a boy so little studious — unless it were to throw it; and the whimsical idea occurred to him that Gran'sir Pudgwick would be a mark not easy to miss. But, quickly divining the old man's meaning, he said seriously:

"His grandmother? She takes his part?"

"She does, and she does n't," Gran'sir Pudgwick replied. "She knows him, and she 'll say as bitter things about him as I do. He shows her no more respect than he shows that cow hitched by the chain. His gram'er 's hitched by a chain and a stake druv into the ground. That chain and stake

is her memory and her affection for the boy's mother—our beloved, misguided, only daughter. When it comes to the case in hand, and I'm determined either to discipline him, or to turn him outdoors, she relents; she can't break the chain nor pull up the stake. She says, 'Think of Angie! for her sake!' and she forgives everything, though his cruel ingratitude is breaking her heart."

The old gran'sir spoke with an emotion that heaved his profound chest. Fred was moved with compassion; but he thought it time to introduce the errand that had brought him.

"Where is he to-day?" he asked. "I've a little business with that grandson of yours"—all the time keeping a lookout over the garden fence, for Canton Quimby on his wheel.

"Nobody knows where is; nobody ever knows," said Gran'sir Pudgwick, fitfully hoeing at a hill of corn, then stopping to talk again. "What scrape is he in now?" he added sharply.

Although he seemed often to find relief to his wounded affections in complaining of his grandson, he was seldom willing to hear others accuse him. This morning, however, he was in an unusually resentful mood; and when Fred replied that a valuable object had been taken from the Mever-

ton premises, in the absence of the family, and that he had reason to believe Oscar knew what had become of it, Gran'sir Pudgwick set up his hoe between the rows of corn, and exclaimed:

"Jest like him! jest like him. We 'll ferret it out! We 'll ferret it out! Was it anything he could carry in a six-quart pail?"

"Oh, yes; very conveniently," Fred answered.

"When was it taken?"

"Three or four days ago; probably last Tuesday night."

"Come with me!" said Gran'sir Pudgwick, starting to leave the corn-patch. "We can't talk here."

He tramped heavily between the rows, with Fred at his side; but stopped suddenly, facing the young man, as he said:

"I 'm afraid he has got it, whatever it was. Wait till I tell you. Two or three mornings ago,—it might have been Wednesday morning,—I noticed a singular thing. He went out afore breakfast, which he does n't often do. Breakfast is a favorite institution of his, and his was waiting that morning. His gram'er will keep his breakfast on the stove till he comes for it, if it ain't till noon. Then it must be ready, and he must have it hot, or there 's a circus!"

Again the old gran'sir started to leave the field, Fred accompanying him.

"But — on that morning, Mr. Pudgwick?"

"I'll tell ye." They stopped on a strip of sward beside the house. "It was such an unusual thing — his going out before he set down to his breakfast, which his gram'er was hurrying to put on the table — that I kept watch of his movements. He went first to the woodshed, then up the stairs — them outside stairs — to the shop — the old paint-shop here, over the barn."

"I know the old shop," said Fred, casting a glance up at it.

"I do precious little work in it, late years," Gran'sir Pudgwick went on; "but once in a while a small job comes in, and I still use it as a shop, though sometimes I don't get up them stairs once a week. He uses it more than I do — for traps, fishing-gear, and such like."

"Well, about that morning?" Fred urged.

"If he has taken anything from your place he had no business with, I ain't going to shield him," Gran'sir Pudgwick went on, as they walked toward the outside stairs. "He was absent some little time in the shop, then he comes back to the woodshed, and gets a six-quart tin-pail, which he carries

up to the shop, with the cover on. All the time I was pretending to read my newspaper by the kitchen window. He was gone about as long as before; then bimeby he comes out of the shop, and down the stairs, without the tin-pail, and comes into the house, to be scolded by his gram'er, and to scold back, 'cause his breakfast was n't served hot, as if he lived in a hotel."

"Can I see that pail?" Fred Melverton asked.

"I guess we can find it," the old man made answer, as he began his slow and laborious ascent of the stairs, with his hand on the rail.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE OLD PAINT SHOP



UST then Canton Quimby glided by on his wheel, and received a signal from Fred, who was patiently following the ponderous Pudgwick up the steep flight. The old man carried a key he had taken from some projection under the stairway; with this he unlocked the shop-door, and entering, sank down, gasping for breath, upon the nearest stool.

The place had a littered and desolate look with its empty paint-buckets, paint-kegs, and oil-cans cluttering one end of the room; old sign-boards stood in a corner; there were paint-smeared trestles and planks, and rubbish of various sorts on the paint-spattered floor.

On one of the trestle-supported planks was a tin pail, which Gran'sir Pudgwick pointed out as the one in question.

"I hain't never looked into it," he said; "but you can. I 'm afraid, though, since it is left out in plain sight so, you won't find what you 're looking for, inside on 't."

Nevertheless, Fred hastened to lift the cover, and found the pail empty.

"I expected it," he said. "You say Oscar came up into the shop twice that morning: the first time without bringing the pail. No doubt that was a visit of exploration; he was looking for a safe hiding-place for his booty. That is still, probably, somewhere in this room, unless he has since taken it away."

"I don't think he has," Gran'sir Pudgwick replied. "For I 've reason to think it is still here."

Fred was eager to learn that reason.

"He has brought fellows in to see it," said the old man.

"That 's interesting!" Melverton exclaimed. "What fellows?"

"That young Allston; he was the first. He was here two evenings ago."

"Winthrop Allston! I thought he had a place in the city.

"Yes, he has, in a jeweler's store," said the old man. "Comes out here, though, pretty often, in

summer. I believe my gran'son sent for him. You see, I 'm telling you everything I know; for if there 's anything crooked, I 'm bound to help you straighten it."

"I 'm greatly obliged to you!" Fred exclaimed. "What you say astonishes me! In a jeweler's store? And Oscar sent for him?"

"I saw a letter addressed to him, on my gran'son's table, the morning before Allston came," said Gran'sir Pudgwick.

Fred Melverton, keeping a lookout for Canton Quimby, had gone over and stationed himself by a window. He now asked permission to open it.

"The air is close here," he said.

"Certain, certain; do anything you like."

Fred opened the window, and stood by it until he had an opportunity to make another signal to Canton Quimby, repassing on his bicycle. Meanwhile he remarked:

"I always thought Wint Allston was a pretty decent sort of fellow."

"Why not?" retorted the old man. "My gran'son goes with decent fellows, when he 's a-mind to. I buy good clothes for him; and, see him dressed up, you 'd say he might be a ornament to society, if he chose. Polite? he can be as polite as a basket

of chips to anybody but his gram'er and me. From something I overheard, as they went out of the yard together, he seemed to be making some sort of a bargain with Winthrop."

"I see!" Fred replied, mentally making swift combinations of all the accumulating circumstances in the case. "You 're sure Winthrop did n't carry the thing away?"

"Yes; without 't was something he could carry in his pockets. Besides," said Gran'sir Pudgwick, "Oscar has had fellows here since: to show it to 'em, I judged. At all events, he had some mysterious business with 'em, up here in the shop—Tom Hatch yesterday forenoon; and that Ketterell whelp in the evening. Never more than one at a time."

"Gideon Ketterell?" Fred exclaimed. "He *is* in it, then, after all!"

"I judge so," said the old man. "As my gran'son went away with him, I heard him say, 'You can't complain but what that 's fair, if I give you half.' Seemed as if there 'd been some sort of trouble between 'em, and Oscar was coaxing him around. He 's a master-hand to coax, as he is to bully; good at one as t' other."

Fred Melverton stepped forward in front of the

fat old gran'sir on the stool, nursing his series of chins, and said earnestly :

"With your consent, Mr. Pudgwick, I wish to make a thorough search of these premises."

"Certain," said the old man. "As I said before, do anything you like. I never shielded my gran'son in wrong-doing, and never will."

"We all know you to be a thoroughly upright man," said Melverton. "I shall need some help; and to have everything regular, I have called in Mr. Hazel."

"Chief of Police?" the old man looked up, somewhat startled. "Is it so serious?"

"If we find nothing it won't be serious at all," Fred replied. "If we do find what I am in search of, it will be well to have an officer at hand. I have relied upon your good-will to enable us to dispense with a search-warrant."

"Certain, certain," said Gran'sir Pudgwick, firmly. "If you can unearth anything of yours on my premises, I am not the man to hender you. Good morning, Mr. Hazel!" as the Chief of Police, in citizen's dress, just then entered the shop, followed by Canton Quimby.

In a few words Fred Melverton explained the situation to the new comers. The first thing Chief

Hazel did, was to go and look into the empty pail. Canton Quimby also looked into it, in his turn; going so far as to hold it upside down, and rap the bottom with his knuckles. As he did this with a droll smile, Fred, who thought he was burlesquing the officer, tried to look grave, but failed.

Then the three held a consultation, while they made a general survey of the room.

"You hain't told me yet what you 're hunting for," observed Gran'sir Pudgwick.

"If we don't find it there 's no need of mentioning it; if we do, you will see it with your own eyes," Fred replied.

"We 'll begin here in the corner, and go through everything," said Chief Hazel; "look into every bucket and tub as we turn 'em over, and set 'em out from the wall."

He did the most of the overturning; Fred and his friend watching to see that the search was thorough, and offering suggestions.

CHAPTER XXIV

OSK OFFERS TO ASSIST IN THE SEARCH



HERE was in the room an air-tight stove which particularly attracted Canton Quimby's attention. But though he explored it so far as to thrust a hand, and afterward his face, into it, and to poke a stick in the ashes and up into the stove-pipe, he made no discoveries.

As the search progressed and gradually became narrowed down to some unpromising rubbish, the light of expectation faded from Melverton's face, and he began to walk about, looking dubiously at the floor.

"We may have to pull up a loose board or two," he said.

"That 's right; rip 'em up!" cried the old gran'-sir. "Tear the shop down, if that will satisfy you."

He was evidently growing sceptical, and there was a tone of sarcasm in his speech.

"I don't think that will be necessary," the young man replied calmly. "We 'll try to leave everything in as good shape as we find it. See a movable board anywhere, Canton?"

And Canton Quimby murmured in his ear:

"I 'm afraid we 're barking at the wrong hole for your fox. That old heavy-weight is too willing. He 's leading us on a false scent."

"Think so?" And Fred gave a keen but puzzled look at the old man, who sat fanning himself with his tattered hat.

"There 's craft in that colossal turnip-head," his friend whispered. "I can see the cunning in his eyes. He 's shaking inside now, with a small earthquake of fun, to think how he has bamboozled you."

"I can't think it," said Melverton, although there was indeed a gleam of something like triumph in the broad Pudgwick visage. "Anyhow, I 'm not going to give it up yet. If we don't find it here, we 'll look in the barn below."

"Here 's somebody that can help you," called out the old man, as his grandson bounced into the room.

Having seen moving figures through the windows from below, and noticed the two bicycles at

the gate, Osk had mounted the stairs two steps at a time, and hurried in to see what was going on in the old shop. At sight of Chief Hazel and the two young men, he stopped and stared.

"Why, I did n't know you had company, gran'sir!" he said, with a forced laugh.

"Well, I have, and I'm glad you 've come to help entertain 'em," replied the gran'sir, tartly.

"What 's the powwow?" Osk inquired, with a brazen attempt to conceal his manifest embarrassment. "Think of buying out gran'sir's shop?" he demanded impudently of Fred. "Going into the house-and-sign painting business?"

"Not while he has so industrious a grandson to succeed him," Fred answered.

"Good! a first-rate hit!" said Osk, with a nervous chuckle. "I owe you one!"

"Perhaps it will turn out that you owe me more than one," Melverton replied, without a smile. "I miss something from our place, and we have come here to look for it."

"Here?" said Osk, with an appearance of great surprise. "Perhaps I can help you; only I can't conceive what you 're talking about."

"Oscar!" said the old man, sternly, "if you know what 's good for yourself, tell a straight story.

What did you bring up here from the woodshed in that tin pail three mornings ago?"

"That pail? I don't remember. Oh, yes!" said Osk, his pretense of bewilderment giving way to a very natural laugh. "I was going a-fishing, or thought I was; and I had a pail for my lines and things, and to get my live bait in. But I did n't go."

"Now let *me* ask you a question," said Fred.

"Ask away!" returned Osk, with gay audacity.

"Then please tell me,—what did you bring home under your coat-flap the night before, when some boys saw you come out of Elkins's orchard and get over the wall?"

Osk's assurance was shaken for a moment. But he rallied quickly.

"The night before? Why, nothing—did—I? Oh, I know what you 're driving at!"—another laugh. "I had a horn' pout; but it was n't under my coat, not very much!"

"Was it a white one?" Fred asked.

"A white horn' pout!" Osk smiled at the fantastic suggestion. "I see what you mean. I had him in my handkerchief. I had just ketched him out of the river. You can ketch 'em only at night."

"Then I suppose you had horned pout for breakfast, that morning, Mr. Pudgwick?" Fred observed.

"If I 'm to speak the truth," said the small voice at the top of the big chin, "there hain't been a horn' pout in my house this twelvemonth."

"Course not," struck in the grandson, with resourceful mendacity. "Gram'er makes such a fuss dressing 'em, I concluded I 'd fling it to the pigs."

Fred exchanged amused glances with Canton Quimby, sitting quietly observant on a trestle. Chief Hazel, who was all the time listening attentively, whilst continuing his search, also smiled incredulously.

"So," said Fred, "after you had taken the trouble to lug it home, and soiled your handkerchief by putting it to so extraordinary a use, you flung your horned pout to the pigs!"

"Yes, I did," Osk declared stoutly. "It does seem funny; I don't wonder you laugh. But when a fellow ketches a fine fish, he hates to throw him back; he naturally holds on to him as long as he can,—likes to show him and brag about him,—you know how it is yourself."

"But I have n't heard that you showed him to the boys who saw you getting over the wall, or bragging about him to them," said Fred.

A quick color came into Osk's habitually unblushing face.

"You think you've caught me there," he replied. "All right! A fellow'll take the trouble to brag to some, and not to others. If you don't believe me, you'll find the head and horns down there in the pig-pen now. Won't he, gran'sir?"

The old man gave a non-committal snort, which was probably all that Osk expected.

Fred went over to the trestle on which his friend sat, and asked, in a low voice:

"What do you think, Canton?"

"Gas-logs!" said Quimby, sententiously; from which allusion to the artificial brands that burn in some modern fireplaces Fred inferred an opinion not favorable to Osk's sincerity. "That old man with the Tower-of-Babel chin does n't take any stock in his stories, either. As a practical prevaricator, he beats t' other boy all hollow!"

"I can't see any movable boards," Fred replied; "and the chief is at his wit's end. Is there any use keeping on?"

"Yes, if only to go over the same ground again," said Quimby. "Do something; on with the dance! I'm trying to get behind that truth-destroyer's eye."

"Your grandfather has kindly granted us per-

mission to search the premises," Fred said to Oscar.

"All right!" said Osk, cheerily. "Can't I assist? Only give me the slightest idea what you are hunting for."

CHAPTER XXV

HOW OSK "ASSISTED"



THE floor-boards all seemed to be nailed down; the plastered walls showed no signs of a secret panel; and every object in the room had been examined. Chief Hazel stood with his hands behind him, evidently convinced of the uselessness of further investigation.

Canton Quimby stepped forward, and looked carefully along the edge of the floor, behind the stove.

"Look here, Melf!" and he called his friend's attention to some flakes of soot, under the end of the funnel, where it entered the chimney. "You know the rule in whist?"

"What rule?" Fred asked.

"Follow *soot*!"

"You think—?"

"I'm sure!" his friend declared. "Twice I've

seen that inventor of fables cast curiously anxious glances at the top-joint of the funnel. That called my attention to it. It has been taken out of the chimney quite lately; you see this soot is fresh."

He turned a sudden look on the grandson, who was watching them with a strangely intent expression.

"We 'll have it down," Fred exclaimed aloud, and called Chief Hazel to his side.

While they were in consultation, Osk stepped smartly forward.

"That stove-pipe? want it down?" said he, "That 's easy. I had it down only a short time ago, to clean it. I 'll show you."

There was an upright stretch of pipe from the stove to an elbow, which connected with a short joint that entered the thimble, about seven feet from the floor. Canton Quimby, who had previously examined the stove and sounded the upright piece, was firmly convinced that the short joint would reveal something; nor was he to be deceived by Osk's obliging offer of assistance.

Chief Hazel was slow to take in the situation. Fred started to bring a box for him to mount upon; but before he could get it in place, Osk had

set a stool at the other side of the stove, stepped up on it, and, with a fragment of newspaper in his hand, had seized the pipe near its junction with the chimney.

“I know just how it goes; I’ll have it down for you in a second,” he said, as he began to wrench the short horizontal piece, working it out of the thimble. “Here it comes!” He exposed the end, and slipped his newspaper over the sooty edge. “Now take care of the lower part, and the stove!” he cried, making a show of tumbling the whole thing to the floor.

“Look out there!” Canton Quimby shouted.

He was not assisting, but he kept careful watch of every movement. He meant to call attention to what Osk was doing; but the outcry only caused Chief Hazel to look more closely to his own management of the lower part of the funnel.

Osk seized the opportunity to thrust his hand into the short section, reach some object, sweep it swiftly into the opening of the chimney, and drop it down the flue.

“Did you see that?” cried Quimby, springing eagerly forward.

Fred Melverton had looked up in time to detect the trick.

OSK ASSISTS IN THE SEARCH.





"I saw something wrapped in a newspaper go into the chimney!" he answered, excitedly.

"Did you?" said Osk. "You saw the piece of newspaper I was handling the pipe with. A draft of air sucked it in. Smutched my fingers after all!"

"Young man," said Canton Quimby, in gleeful earnest, "you have talents of a high order. Put to some useful purpose, they would insure you a brilliant career. But they won't serve your turn here. Hand down that pipe!"

"Anything else?" Osk inquired, impudently.

The funnel was brought to the floor; and Quimby, tipping and turning it, shook out Osk's fragment of newspaper, which had *not* been sucked into the flue.

"Well! what are you going to do about it?" said Osk, his short, hooked nose thrust forward, and his eyes sparkling insolent defiance.

"Since you have answered some of my questions, I 'll answer yours—and more truthfully," Fred Melverton replied, with an air of quiet determination. "I 'm going to explore the flue to the bottom; get a mason to knock out the lower bricks, if there 's no opening below; and, in the meantime, I 'm going to ask Chief Hazel to take charge of you."

"All right," said Osk promptly. "That 's just what I 'd do in your place. But you 'll find you 're very much mistaken as to the thing that went down the chimney; and, what 's more, I can prove it."

"No doubt, you can prove almost anything, if you have the chance," said Melverton. "It 's to keep you from having chances that I ask the chief to take care of you. I 'll go with you to Judge Carter's office, Mr. Hazel, and enter my complaint."

"Gran'sir," said Osk, with cool assurance, "will you come along, too, and be my bail?"

"No, I won't!" the old man exclaimed, fuming with wrath and indignation. "I 've stood your bail and paid your fines too often. Now if you 've got into a worse scrape than common, you may get out of it without any help from me."

"All right, gran'sir," said Osk, cheerfully. "It won't be the first time I 've been in the lock-up; but I never stayed long. Just let me bid gram'er good by,"—as the chief laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I 'll see that this room is put in order later," Fred said to the old man. "Can we find the base of the flue?"

"Certain; I 'll show you; it 's in the barn-cellar,"

replied the old man. "You may knock as many holes in it as you please."

"Thank you, Mr. Pudgwick. Mr. Hazel, beware of that boy's tricks! I'll go for a mason, and be at the judge's office about as soon as you are. Old man," Fred said to his friend, as they preceded the others down the stairs, "what do you think now?"

"Want my opin'? I find I was mistaken about the venerable chin-propeller," Quimby admitted.

"He 's perfectly upright, I am certain!" Fred declared.

"Yes; perpendic' as a bean-pole—though not quite so slim. He was awfully anxious, one time, that his cub of a grandson should get clear. That 's what deceived me. But we 're right about the cup."

They paused, before getting on their wheels, to witness the meeting between Osk and his grandmother, at the kitchen door.

"Oh, child!" she said, in deep distress, "be you took up ag'in?"

"It 's nothing," said Osk. "I shall be back here in a few minutes. Don't worry."

At the chief's suggestion, however, she went to put up a hasty luncheon, which she brought with trembling hands, and urged her grandson to accept. As he indignantly refused it, Chief Hazen said:

"I'll take it for him. He'll need it before he sees your table again."

"And your 'bettermost' coat, dearie," pleaded the old lady, "do put that on. I'll bring it in a minute."

"No, no!" said Osk; and an ill-natured look came into his eyes, which showed plainly the kind of despot he was in the home of his grandparents. "I say no! do you hear?" he called after her, savagely, as she was going to bring the garment. "I don't want it, and I won't have it! Come along, Cop!" And he marched off with Chief Hazel.

"Did you ever see such intolerable insolence?" Fred remarked to his friend, as they rode away.

"Simply coloss'!" replied Canton Quimby.

CHAPTER XXVI

TEACHING THE DUMB TO SPEAK



H, mama," exclaimed Ida Lisle, with filial admiration, that afternoon, "I do think you are the most patient mother in all this weary world!"

"What mother would not be patient in such a cause?" Mrs. Lisle replied, with softly beaming eyes. "It is very slow, and very difficult, and sometimes I should be quite discouraged if I did n't constantly say to myself that what has been done for others I may also do for my dear child!"

She was teaching deaf little Laurie to talk.

The affliction that deprived him of his hearing had come before he had learned to speak more than a very few words; and these he seemed to have forgotten when, after a prolonged and dangerous illness, he regained his bodily health. In his fifth year a few attempts were made to teach

him the printed alphabet, together with the sign alphabet used by deaf-mutes, but his restless activity had thus far defeated these efforts. It seemed impossible to fix his attention upon what was so far outside of his own little world; and the very facility with which he had always found and used more natural ways of communication was a hindrance to his acquiring any other method.

But of late Mrs. Lisle had abandoned the alphabetical system and begun with him an entirely new scheme of education. She was teaching him to form articulate sounds, and to read and imitate lip-movements.

He was much more patient under this discipline, since it awakened his curiosity and gave him something to do. It was her custom to place him in his high chair facing her, where he could watch her closely. Then she would put his little hands to use, to perceive the vocal movements of her own throat, and to feel for them at his own; and to feel the breath, soft or forcible, as it came from her lips. She had never received any instruction in teaching speech to a deaf-mute; she only knew from what she had read that it could be done, and she had gone to work in what seemed to her the simplest way.

It was a delight to little Laurie to find, as he quickly did, that he could produce in his own throat such tremblings as he felt in hers. And what joy this first step in his vocal development brought to the mother's fondly anxious heart! Both clapped their hands over it, and with mutual hugs and kisses celebrated the event. Then each member of the household had to come and feel the motions of the child's throat, hear the sounds he emitted, and express great surprise and delight.

The first intelligible word that came from his hitherto dumb lips was *mamma*, which he quickly learned as the name of the dearest person on earth. True, it was for two or three lessons little more than *nummum*; then the final *m* was left off; and at length he was made to open his mouth wide enough to change the short *u* sound to *ah*. This triumph alone was sufficient to reward the proud mother for all her previous trials and disappointments.

"Oh! but how can he ever learn to read words by watching our lips?" said Ida. "Think how many do not come to our lips at all, and must seem just alike to him!—nod, not, dog, dot, got; in, it, ill, knit; at, eat, can, can't, and hosts of

others. Even if we should look beyond the teeth, we should often see no difference. Then so many sounds are formed, even by the lips, in precisely the same way,—be, me; men, pen; if, give; there's no end of them!"

She said this even after Midget had achieved *mamma*; not so much to throw doubt upon the success of the undertaking, as to hear Mrs. Lisle reiterate her assurances.

"Yes, my dear, I know all the difficulties, and I don't expect that all of them ever will be overcome. But they have been overcome in a great measure by others; and who is brighter than our Laurie?"

"Or who has a more devoted teacher?" said Ida, with glistening eyes.

"No deaf person can ever distinguish all the sounds from merely watching the mouth," her mother went on. "Neither can you, Ida, distinguish all the written letters, taken separately, in your friends' correspondence. How often the *m*'s and *n*'s and *w*'s, and other characters, run together, or look just alike! So that often there will be whole words you can't make out by themselves. But one word helps you to the sense of another. Sometimes you have to glance through a whole sentence before you get an idea of its meaning,

when all comes to you like a flash. It is in some such way that the deaf read spoken language. Long practice makes it almost intuitive."

Mrs. Lisle repeated some wonderful stories she had heard or read of deaf persons, who could speak and read lip-movements so well that they were able to go about in society, and even transact important business, without betraying their infirmity; and added:

"I am positive we shall make an accomplished speech-reader of our bright little Laurie, and perhaps prepare him for a useful and happy career."

He was resting in his chair while this talk — like many such talks — was going on, and he seemed to know what it was about.

"Mamma! mamma!" he called triumphantly, as if in evidence of the truth of what she was saying; and he laughed as she caught him in her arms with tears of joy.

He spoke with the drawl peculiar to the deaf, not always agreeable to hear; but it was the gladdest of sounds to Mrs. Lisle.

It happened to be the day when Tracy had sent Fred Melverton and his friend Quimby on what he called their *fox-hunt*. He had hurried home to tell his mother and sister, and there had been much

excited talk on the subject. So it chanced that Ida suggested:

"Make him say *cup*; that should be an easy word."

The mother had previously drilled him in the sound of hard *c*, or *k*, with indifferent success. Again she made him look into her mouth, and put one finger in, and to feel the sudden impulse of the breath, while with the other hand he felt the concussion and vibration of her throat.

"Kuh-kuh," he repeated after her, making the sound very distinctly.

"Oh, Laurie, what a dear, delightful little pupil you are!" she joyfully exclaimed. And again they had to hug each other, the child laughing gleefully upon the mother's neck. "Now try!" she said, having placed his fingers again at her throat so he might know the sound: "*Cup*."

"*Come*," drawled Laurie, prolonging the sound through the nose after the closing of the lips.

She had got from him a new word unexpectedly, and was as well pleased as if it had been the right one. She made him pronounce it over and over again, and by means of the gestures he was familiar with, explained to him its meaning.

Enough had been accomplished for one lesson;

but he was getting on so fast, things difficult becoming all at once unexpectedly easy, that she resolved to make another trial of *cup*. She showed him how the vibration of the throat ceased with the closing of the lips, which then opened with a slight percussion of the breath. He was intensely interested. Both were absorbed in the strange exercise, which to an observer would have seemed incomprehensible and comic until the touching significance of it was revealed.

Mr. Walworth chanced to enter just as Midget, who had succeeded in enunciating *cup*, immediately putting the two words together, cried, "Come—cup," and jumped from his chair, too happy over his success to sit any longer.

"I never saw such progress!" said the minister. "You will have him talking like any other child—almost," he put in conscientiously, "in a few months."

"He must learn the meaning of words as we go along," said the joyous mother. "Get a cup, Ida; remember that he does not know it by name yet."

So a tea-cup was brought, and he was made to understand that the word belonged to the thing. Then he ran to the pantry, and brought out his

own silver drinking-cup, uttering all the while,
"Cup, cup!"

Then he left his own cup and the tea-cup on the table, and ran to the outer door, beckoning and calling:

"Come — cup! Come — cup!"

He ran into his brother Tracy's arms.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY



"WHAT is this?" cried Tracy, rushing into the room. "He is talking! Midget is talking!"

In the excited state of his mind, that forenoon, while waiting to hear of the success of the *fox-hunt*, it is no wonder that the seeming miracle made him fairly shriek with rapture. He in turn had to hold and hug the child, while the manner of the miracle-working was briefly explained; by which time Midget had struggled from his arms, and was at the door again, calling "*Come — cup!*" beckoning, and alternately making a fluttering movement with his arms, and forming a cup-like shape with his hands.

"It is a bird's nest he means," said Mrs. Lisle. "He wants to show us one, and know whether we call that a cup, too. Go with him, Tracy, and explain it. I must see to the dinner if we are to invite those young men."

Midget led the way, faster than his brother cared to follow, down the slope to the brookside, and onward to the bridge; in the cool shadow of which the child climbed the lower wall of the abutment, to the end of a timber, where the phoebe's nest used to be.

"Must be the phoebes are building again," thought Tracy.

Midget had been the first to discover the absence of the old nest, and he had reported this to his friends with childish grief and anger. They, too, had been indignant at the robbery; but more important events had lately driven the subject from Tracy's mind.

"He is peeping—just as he used to peep into the old nest," thought he, and his indignation revived, as he remembered how fond Midget was of his feathered friends, and how little fear of him they ever betrayed. Sometimes the mother-bird would remain sitting on her nest, while his little nose, as he climbed and peeped, almost touched her. But where were the phoebes now?

Not a bird was heard or seen; nothing sang but the brook.

"*Come—come!*" cried Midget, with his cheek against the end of the heavy string-piece, where it rested on the wall.



MIDGET REVEALS A SECRET.



Stepping along the little sandy beach that bordered the bed of the streamlet, Tracy stooped beneath the bridge; a growing sense of apprehension falling upon him, with the cavern-like shadow.

Then suddenly, as he put his cheek against the child's, and, looking up, saw what the child saw, he started back in utter amazement and dismay.

For there, on the top of the wall, close against the beam, from which the old nest had been broken away by ruthless hands, was indeed a cup-shaped thing, but not a nest; an actual cup—the cup of all cups—

THE PRIZE CUP!

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FAMILY COUNCIL



WHEN Tracy returned to the house all the joy of the morning had gone out of his face; and he was followed reluctantly by Midget, no longer repeating his first glad words — all the happiness faded from *his* face, too, which was the face of a miserable little culprit.

“Why, Tracy!” Ida cried at sight of him. “You look sick!”

“*I am* sick,” he replied dejectedly, holding one hand behind him. “Where’s mama?”

His mother was called, and she came in haste; she regarded her two boys with anxious, inquiring eyes.

“What has happened?” was all she could say.

“Look at this!” Tracy answered, in a choked voice.

And with a countenance full of anguish he held

out an object which, it would seem, should have gladdened any honest boy's eyes — a beautiful, silver-bright, gold-lined goblet.

"Fred's cup!" "Where did you find it?" cried mother and sister at once.

"Midget had it," said the boy, from the depths of his wretched soul.

"How did *he* come by it?" cried the mother, with an amazed look at the little mischief-maker, who stood peering in at the door, with shy, expectant eyes.

"He took it," said Tracy. "He has told me all about it."

"The stolen cup! How could he?" exclaimed the mother. "What is this?"

As Tracy handed her the goblet, she noticed that the gold lining was half hidden by some soft, matted substance, with which the hollow was partly filled.

"Come here!" she called, and motioned to Midget, who, however, did not stir, but watched eagerly to see what was to come of his strange misdoing.

"He has been up to the Melverton house with me," Tracy explained, "and shown me how he got into one of the dining-room windows, from

the piazza, and took the cup from a sideboard drawer."

"Oh, Laurie, Laurie!" groaned Mrs. Lisle; while Ida in her turn examined the curious contents of the goblet.

"As near as I can make out," Tracy proceeded, "he had peeked through the blinds and seen Gid Ketterell handling it, and showing it to somebody — Osk Ordway, I suppose. He already had a spite against Gid; so when he missed the phœbe's nest under the bridge, he took the cup. For what, do you think?"

In her amazement and distress, the poor mother could n't conjecture.

"To be revenged on Gid," suggested Ida; "though it does n't seem as if he could have looked so far ahead as that."

"No, not for that," Tracy replied. "But it was really to pay the birds for the loss of their nest! That's what he put this fine grass in it for — as something inviting for them to lay their eggs in."

And in the midst of his intense chagrin, the elder brother had to laugh at the pretty, fantastic, childish notion.

"He put the cup in place of the nest; and he seems to have had no doubt that the phœbes would

adopt it, when they were ready to raise another brood; and when he saw how sorry I was about the nest, he thought he would please me by pointing at the fine nest he had made for them inside. It 's all as cunning as it can be — but — oh!" and Tracy ended with something like a yell of pain.

Mother and sister laughed, too, with tender mirthfulness; and with bright tears in her forgiving eyes Mrs. Lisle held out loving arms to the waiting Midget. He rushed into them, and nestled affectionately to her.

"Why were you so horrified?" queried Ida. "One would think you were not glad the cup was found."

"Of course I am glad! but to have it turn out that Midget is the rogue!" said Tracy.

"But he meant no harm. He only meant to do an act of justice to the birds,—the precious little innocent!" the mother exclaimed, rocking the little fellow to and fro.

"Fred Melverton will laugh—they will all laugh!" said Ida, with a merry peal. "It 's the funniest thing I ever heard!"

"Funny!" Tracy echoed, with a lugubrious grin. "But there 's one that won't laugh; he will get laughed at! I 've done such a smart stroke of

detective business! I was so sure of everything! And my telegram to Fred!" he added, his voice running up into a falsetto of comic despair.

Ida wiped her eyes and said:

"Why should you care for that? It was all a mistake."

"Don't I know it was a mistake, without being told?" cried Tracy. "Have n't I found it out to my sorrow? I fairly grew fat on my grudge, when I found Gid was discharged under suspicion; and I was just the biggest fellow in this town when I took his place and set about ferreting out the robbery. How can I tell Fred that Gid and Osk had nothing to do with it, after the ridiculous *fox-hunt* I have sent them on? Oh, my gracious!" his voice tending again to the wild falsetto.

Mrs. Lisle, still rocking the child, her face full of tearful smiles, admitted sympathizingly:

"It will be a little humiliating, no doubt."

"A little humiliating!" Tracy almost shouted. "It's the most crushing thing that ever happened to me. Do you know, when I saw the cup on the wall I was tempted to leave it there and say nothing about it: to let the suspicion still rest on Gid and Osk! Would you believe I could be so mean?" And he scowled with bitter self-reproach.

"It would have been mean and wicked enough if you had listened to the temptation," said his mother. "But I know you did not for a single moment. I know you could n't do such a wrong, even to an enemy. Better the truth, though it shames us, than any advantage gained by an act of injustice."

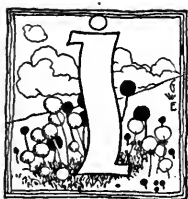
Ida was about to empty the cup of its curious contents, in order to dust and brighten it; but Tracy cried out to her:

"Don't do that! I want Fred to see it just as it is. Oh! what luck is he having with his *fox-hunt*, I wonder!"

"Here he comes right into the yard!" Ida exclaimed, stepping quickly aside from the open window. "He and his friend, on their wheels!"

CHAPTER XXIX

A MERRY PORCH PARTY



IN a moment more the bicycles were lying on the turf, and the bicyclers were mounting the porch steps.

"Let them in, Ida," Tracy hurriedly whispered. "I can't look them in the face."

"You must," said Ida, escaping from the room; "I can't be seen in this house rig."

"You may as well meet it, Tracy," said his mother.

So, putting on a resolute look, Tracy went to the front door.

"Come in," he said, "and tell us what luck you 've had."

"We can tell you here," Fred Melverton replied, in radiant good humor.

"We 've had great luck, thanks to you," said Canton Quimby.

"We 've found the cup," Fred added,—they were both so full of the good news that they told it together,—“and we 've got the thief in jail.”

"You can't—you don't mean—"stammered Tracy, astounded.

"We have n't got the cup in hand," said Canton Quimby; "but we have located it—we know just where it is; and, as Melf says, we 've got one of the thieves in the lock-up. We shall have another there in an hour or two, if I can persuade Melf to do his duty."

Tracy stared, and demanded:

"How many are there, according to your reckoning?"

"Two, anyway" Fred answered positively. "Oscar Ordway had it in his possession; but it seems Gid Ketterell is an accessory,—probably after the fact,—and that he expects to share the proceeds of the plunder. I have n't sworn out a warrant for him yet; but I left word with his mother, just now, that if he wants to wash his hands of a dangerous piece of business, he 'd better lose no time in coming to see me. Then she learned for the first time that I had discharged him."

"And she was n't so much pleased as if she had had a fortune of a million dollars left her," said

Canton Quimby, significantly. "He 'll wish himself in jail already when he falls into her clutches."

Tracy did not appear half so much elated as his friends thought he had reason to be.

"I 'm afraid—I don't understand—there 's a big mistake!" he murmured.

"It 's a mistake of the right sort—a mistake for the rogue that 's got caught," Fred Melverton replied, with unshaken gaiety.

He threw himself on a porch chair, while his friend sat upon the rail; and between them they gave an amusing account of their adventure, to which Tracy listened in mute amazement.

"We did n't find Judge Carter at home," Fred concluded, "so the Chief just took Osk to the cells for safe-keeping. But we did unearth a mason; and he is to go with us at one o'clock to break a hole in the base of the chimney. I 'm sorry for Osk, but then—"

"He must n't make too free with other people's prize cups, you know," struck in Canton Quimby. "Boys take a good many liberties; but there is a limit: we draw the line at silverware, Melf and I—especially silver won in a race by hard rowing. Is n't that the point, Melf?"

"It 's all too good!" exclaimed Tracy, rousing

from a sort of dream. "It ought to be true. But I don't see through it — unless — do you miss anything else out of your house?"

"Not yet—I think I told you; though of course I don't know how many things may have been stolen," Fred replied, puzzled in his turn. "Why?"

"There must be something; for — look here."

Tracy turned to his mother, who was just then coming out of the house, with a countenance all smiles, bearing Midget in her arms, and holding up the prize cup in her hand.

Melverton hardly paused to greet Mrs. Lisle as he sprang to his feet. "What 's that?" he exclaimed.

"If it is n't your lost cup, then I don't know what it is," she replied, holding it out to him.

"It is that—or it is magic!" he cried, in extreme surprise, taking it in his hand. "Where did it come from? Where has it been? Oh, Quimby," turning to his friend, "here 's the game we've been chasing down Gran'sir Pudgwick's chimney!"

"I don't catch on!" Canton Quimby replied. "It must be an intoxicating cup, that makes everybody see double. Is there any answer to this enigma?" completing the word out of respect to Mrs. Lisle's presence.

"I beg your pardon!" said Fred, suddenly remembering that he had not presented his friend, which he proceeded to do, with awkward abruptness. "I believe I've lost my wits. What is all this?" observing the bits of wilted grass that half filled the cup.

"I wish Laurie could speak and explain it," Mrs. Lisle replied, while Midget, knowing very well what the conversation was about, shyly hid his face in her neck. "For, I 'm sorry to say, he is the rogue!"

"And our other two?" cried Melverton.

"Seems to be a pretty good day for rogues," said Canton Quimby.

"I don't know about the others," said Mrs. Lisle. "Tracy, tell them about Midget."

She herself rarely called the child by that name—never, indeed, except when he had shown himself extraordinarily mischievous.

And Tracy told. Melverton burst into shouts of laughter, while Canton Quimby shook with more quiet convulsions.

"A bird's nest!" said Fred. "Oh, you dear, queer little Midget! You must give me a kiss for that!"

He held out his arms. Midget, perceiving the

pleasant turn the affair was taking, leaped into them, with silent, joyous laughter. Then, after a good hugging, he pointed to the cup, now in Tracy's hands, and repeated the words he had that morning learned — words that had made all who heard them so happy, and which he seemed to know would please his friend Fred no less:

“Cup — cup! Come — cup!”

As this part of the morning's experiences had been omitted from Tracy's story, Fred was filled anew with wonder and admiration. He danced about with the child, repeating with him the marvelous syllables, to Midget's great satisfaction as he watched the young man's lips and felt his throat, while Quimby looked on with keen enjoyment of the scene.

In the midst of which jubilation Ida appeared, lovely as a rose, and almost as red, having given a graceful twist to her hair and thrown a scarf about her neck; and the young minister followed, and there were introductions and congratulations, until a passer-by must have remarked that there was a livelier porch party at the old parsonage than it had ever known before, in the fifty years of its sober existence.

CHAPTER XXX

GID KETTERELL CONFESSES



HIS idea may have occurred to a strong-armed and stern-featured woman who was just then crossing the ravine from the Melverton place and ascending the slope in the direction of the merry voices. Leading by the coat-collar a reluctant youth who was much inclined to lag a step or two in the rear, she made her appearance below the house just as Fred was saying:

"But, Canton, we forget we have a fellow locked up for stealing the cup that was never stolen!"

"No matter," Quimby replied. "He has stolen something else — and very likely out of your house — if we can only find what it is."

"Here 's somebody that perhaps can tell you," said Tracy, as Mrs. Ketterell dragged forward her unwilling son into full view."

There was a flush on the washerwoman's hard

features and a green fire in her eyes as she stationed herself at the foot of the porch steps, still holding Gideon by his coat-collar. Her tawny mane, combed straight back over her head and down her neck, was badly frizzed and rumpled, and helped to give her features a wild, ferocious aspect.

"Mr. Frederick," she began, "if you 'll pardon the intrusion, I 've brought my boy here to make a clean breast of the bad job you spoke of; and if he lives, and I live, he 's going to tell you the whole truth before ever he goes back to the home he has disgraced."

"If that is so —" began Melverton; then, turning to Mrs. Lisle and her daughter, he said apologetically, "I am afraid we are going to have a scene."

"It is most certainly so," said the washerwoman, her red knuckles turning white with the new grip she gave the boy's collar. "I don't whale him very often, but when I do I make up for neglected duties in that particular. I not only settle old scores with interest, but I give him a few extrys on account, so I sha'n't be running too much in his debt."

"Gideon is getting to be a big boy for discipline of that sort," Fred suggested.

"So indeed he is," said the mother; "but he ain't so big yet but what I can handle him, with a spare finger or two kept in reserve for emergencies; and he hain't forgot the small taste of the wrong end of the whip he received wunst when he attempted to handle *me*. He was persuaded then to take his medicine in regular fashion, and be decent about it. Think of a younker like him raising his hand against his own mother, ladies and gentlemen! But though, as I said, he done it wunst, he never done it twicet, the scapegrace! Will you tell the truth to your friend and benefactor, now?" she demanded, giving the said scapegrace a sharp wrench by the collar. "Say 'I will,' if you know what 's hullsome for your soul and body!"

"I will," said Gideon, promptly, with a shake in his voice not caused altogether by the twist his mother gave him. At the same time he presented so lugubrious a countenance that Tracy felt immensely relieved as to any triumph his enemy was to gain over him, whatever the outcome of the situation.

"I am glad of that," said Fred Melverton: "for some things need very much to be explained. But"—turning again to the ladies—"this is hardly the place in which to conduct our inquiries."

"Indeed, I 've sense enough to know that; and I 'm begging Mrs. Lisle to excuse what may seem to be very ill manners. I went first to your place, Mr. Frederick; then, hearing your voice, I came directly here, in order to lose no time in bringing my boy to terms whilst a healthy terror was on him."

"That was right, Mrs. Ketterell," said Mrs. Lisle, approvingly. "Let him say right here what is to be said."

"And let it be the barefooted facts this time," said Canton Quimby.

Melverton, standing with his hands behind him, looking down over the porch rail at mother and son, addressed Gideon.

"You acknowledge that what you told me yesterday was not the truth?"

"Answer!" Mrs. Ketterell commanded him, as he hesitated. "Did you tell him whoppers?"

"I s'pose I did," mumbled Gideon.

"You know about the cider?" Fred queried.

"Yes," Gid answered; "but I did n't drink it. Osk Ordway made me go with him to the cellar, and he dranked the most of it."

"And did you find cider in the cellar of your friend and benefactor, and treat that miserable Osk

Ordway with it?" cried the irate mother. "Lucky for your skin and scalp, I did n't know that before!"

Quitting her hold on his collar, she seized his ear, and gave it such a tweak as elicited from him a sharp yelp.

"If you please, Mrs. Ketterell," said Fred, with difficulty maintaining his gravity, while everybody else laughed, except the two most concerned, who saw no fun in the little comedy they were enacting. "So, Gideon, you let Oscar into the house, did you?"

The boy was dumb again.

"Did you, or did you not?" said his mother, giving the ear another twist, with much the same effect as if it had been a spigot by which she turned on his squeals.

"I did! I did!" yelled Gideon.

"If you please, Mrs. Ketterell!" Fred repeated, deprecatingly. "And the prize cup—you know something about that?"

"Will you speak, sir?" cried his mother.

She had taken her hand away; but the impulse to give the spigot another turn was so evident in her that Gideon dodged, and blurted out:

"I opened the drawer, and showed it to him: he made me do it. But I put it back, and that 's the last I saw of it—hope to die!" he vowed.

"And you don't know what became of it?"

"Sure 's I live! I thought Osk might have come that night and taken it, but he swears he did n't, and he wants to make me think it has n't been stole at all."

"Do you believe him?" Melverton demanded.

"Some o' the time I think I do, and then again I guess I don't; but as for knowing a thing about it, I 'm as innocent as—as innocent as that child!" And Gideon, having found what he deemed a strong illustration, flung his elbow out toward Midget playing on the walk.

Fred repressed a smile, and said:

"Then what has Oscar kept hidden in the stove-pipe in his gran'sir's shop?—the thing he has been so secret about, which you are to share the proceeds of, when it is sold?"

"I—don't—know—of—any—"

Gid had got so far in his stammered denial, when his mother interrupted him. The green fire was flaming up in her eyes as she said:

"Please, Mr. Frederick, may I take him by the flap of his ear again? It 's the best way I know to

wring a drop or two of the truth out of him," the expert in wringing added grimly.

Fred put her off with a wave of his hand.

"Gideon," he said, "you know very well that Oscar has carried home plunder of some kind, and hidden it in the stove funnel; but perhaps you are not aware that he has landed in jail in consequence. Was it anything taken out of our house? I am waiting for you to clear yourself of complicity in that business."

"Will you?" said his mother.

"I will!" Gideon almost shouted, dodging her uplifted hand again. "It's nothing he took out of your house, or out of anybody's house. But he said he would kill me if I told."

"Tell, and be killed then," said his mother. "You certainly will be killed if you don't."

And Gideon told.

"It's the phœbes' nest."

"The phœbes' nest?" exclaimed Melverton. "He took that?"

"Yes, the very day I showed him the cup. I blamed him for it, and told him he would get prosecuted, and scared him so he promised to put it back on the stones, under the bridge. But he just hid it in the bushes, and went back for

it in the evening, and carried it home, and got Wint Allston to come and see it, and offer him half a dollar for it. Wint has a permit for taking nests and birds, and he is making a collection. Then Osk tried to sell it for more to Tom Hatch. I was to have half he got for it, 'cause I knew of his taking it, and he had got me turned off from my place."

"Is all that satisfactory?" Mrs. Ketterell inquired. "For if there 's more to come out of him, we 're bound to fetch it."

"It is tolerably satisfactory, as far as it goes," Fred replied. "But we have n't got at the bottom facts yet. Eh, Quimby?"

"That Ordway rapscaillon," remarked the Yale junior, "is an artesian well of deception, and we have n't begun to fathom him. 'T was n't a mere bird's nest he was so excited about. I believe now he was laughing in his sleeve all the time at having led us on a false trail."

"The trouble will be to get on the right one," Fred answered. "He was a pretty fellow for you to let into the house!"—turning sharply on Gideon. "Then for you to leave a window unfastened! And that drawer—it does n't seem now as if that could have been locked."

"I 've been thinking about that," said Gideon; "and I ain't dead sure but what I may have put the key back where I found it, without locking the drawer. I remember Osk took it out of the lock and handed it to me, at the last minute. And I may have left that window unclasped. I was so excited by Osk Ordway's being in the house, and getting the cider, and I was in such a hurry to have him out, I got all mixed up, and did n't know what I did do, or what I did n't do."

"And was your beautiful prize cup took in consequence of his neglect?" the indignant washerwoman demanded.

"By his own account, it was through his fault that it was lost," Fred replied. "But I am glad to say he was not concerned in taking it."

"But he is responsible," cried the mother, while her impatient hand started for Gid's ear, but stopped at his coat-collar. "And let me say to you, Mr. Frederick, if hard work will pay you for your loss, he shall work it out, if I have to stand over him with a whip, all the rest of the summer."

"It is something money could n't pay for," said Fred.

"Hear that now, will you?" Mrs. Ketterell exclaimed.

"I'm—so—sorry!" whined the contrite Gideon.

"There 'll be no need of your spending the summer in the way you propose," Fred smilingly assured the mother. "The cup has been found."

At the same time Mrs. Lisle held the goblet up to the light, and Midget, who had been playing about the porch, but observing slyly all that was going on, took up his joyous cry:

"Cup—cup! Come—cup!"

CHAPTER XXXI

OSK IN COURT



ASTONISHMENT at this double revelation served to modify the washerwoman's wrath. She prepared to depart.

"And do you want my boy to take care of your place any more?" she asked.

"I rather think you had better find some other sphere of usefulness for him," Melverton replied, to Tracy's very great satisfaction. "I may want one thing of him, however,—to appear as a witness in the matter of the nest robbery, before Judge Carter, this afternoon."

"You shall have him!" said Mrs. Ketterell, with grim resolution, as she gave a final clutch at the lapel of her son's coat, and led him away.

"I'm wondering," remarked Fred Melverton, at Mrs. Lisle's dinner-table, "just what I'd better do with the fellow I've got locked up on a mistaken charge."

"It might be an awkward posish," said Canton Quimby—"position," quickly revising his language to suit his audience, and blushing under the merry look Ida gave him. "But you have n't entered your complaint yet; and when he comes up before the justice, you 've only to switch off from the wrong charge upon the true one."

"I really think he ought to be made an example," observed Mr. Walworth.

"No doubt," said Melverton. "But the worst of it is, there 'll be a fine, which somebody will have to pay for him."

"Too bad to have it fall on the old chin-piler—I mean his respectable grandparent," Quimby hastened to correct himself, under Ida's laughing eyes. "But he says he won't pay any more fines for him."

"He has said that before, and then paid them," Fred replied, consulting his watch. "But I shall try to hold him to his resolution this time. Sorry to leave your table so abruptly, Mrs. Lisle; but an engagement with the mason, and other disagreeable duties—I 'd a great deal rather stay here," he laughed, with a humorously reluctant look at Quimby.

"Can't we let the mason—and justice—wait?" his friend replied. "I don't want to leave this

spot." He glanced from Mrs. Lisle to Ida, with a smile of frank enjoyment. "But I'm glad of one more chance to look into that impostor's soul — if he has one. There's a fascination in the fellow's eyes. Do you remember how they blazed at his gram'er, Melf, when the poor old creature wished to fetch his 'bettermost' coat?"

"There'll be a lively time when we have him up before Judge Carter," Fred said. "Come around to the police court in about an hour, Tracy, if you want to see the fun."

The appointment with the mason was kept, the base of the chimney was broken into, in the presence of Gran'sir Pudgwick, Chief Hazel, and the two young men; and the phœbes' nest, still in its newspaper wrapping, was taken out. The delicate eggs were broken, but the nest itself was in good condition.

Canton Quimby was so thoroughly convinced that this was not the only object purloined and concealed by the same hands, that he made a thorough search amidst the soot and rubbish of the chimney, and afterward reëxamined the stovepipe and the flue in the shop above; but nothing further was brought to light.

"I'm afraid," he said to Melverton, "that that precocious master of craft has beaten us."

Arraigned before the village magistrate, that afternoon, Osk Ordway, with amazing effrontery, derided the charge of nest robbery, even when the nest was produced in evidence. But at the calling of an unexpected witness his manner changed.

Gideon Ketterell was sworn.

Gid gave his testimony in terror of the vengeance threatened by Osk's eyes, and also of another pair flashing greenish fire upon him from under a heavy mane of tawny hair, in the rear of the court-room. To the embarrassed and unwilling witness the fear of the second pair of eyes was, for good and wholesome reasons, the greater.

Gideon told a pretty straight story of Osk's visit to the Melverton house that memorable Tuesday, omitting smaller details; of Osk's saying, as he left the door, that he was going to look at the phœbes' nest under the bridge; and of his actually having the nest in his hat when Gid found him sitting among the bushes by the brookside afterward.

"Is this the nest?" Judge Carter inquired.

Gideon stooped over it, where it lay in the opened newspaper wrapper, on the judge's table.

"I should say so; but the eggs was n't broke then," replied the witness.

The judge proceeded with his questions, prompted by Fred Melverton.

"After you saw it in his hat, in the bushes, did you ever see it again until to-day?"

Gid hesitated, and moved cautiously a step farther from Osk, who stood scowling near by, in front of the judge's desk.

"I did," said the witness.

"Tell us where."

"He kept it hid in the top of the stovepipe in the paint-shop. I saw him take it out and put it back again."

"That will do," said the judge; and with a breath of relief Gideon stepped back, followed by the eyes of the vindictively leering prisoner.

"It seems a perfectly plain case," Judge Carter remarked to Gran'sir Pudgwick, who sat frowning and fretting, and opening and closing his telescopic chin (to quote Canton Quimby's lively expression), during these revelations. "I shall have to impose the fine."

"That 's all right, Gran'sir!" said Osk, with an impatient shrug. "Pony up, and le' 's get out of this. It makes me tired."

Beads of perspiration, not produced solely by the closeness of the air of the court-room, glistened on the old man's bald crown and visibly writhing features.

"If it must be, I s'pose it must," he said discontentedly. "But I hope, Judge, you 'll put it at your lowest figger."

"The statute fixes the fine at ten dollars," replied the judge. "I 've no discretion in the matter."

"And what if 't ain't paid?" asked the old man sharply.

Melverton and Quimby were watching him with the keenest interest, and nudging each other. Osk, from under his lowering brows, fixed piercing eyes upon the irresolute gran'sir.

The magistrate of the informal village court relaxed into the genial neighbor as he turned to give Mr. Pudgwick friendly advice.

"You can have the case continued, and employ a lawyer for your grandson, or you can appeal it to a higher court. But the evidence is so plain, and the law so clear, that it would be very unwise to incur any further cost in the matter."

"I don't want no cost. I want to save cost. I don't want to pay that fine!" objected the old man.

"Nothing obliges you to do it. And I 'm inclined to think it will be as well for you not to do it," remarked Judge Carter, blandly.

"Then what?" squeaked the big man's small voice, after a moment's reflection.

"He will be committed to jail, and detained at the discretion of the court."

The old man turned his eyes toward his grandson, and demanded, "What do you say to that?"

And Osk answered with an indignant scoff: "Just for taking a bird's nest? It's absurd. You and gram'er never 'll allow that."

"I hain't got ten dollars about me," said the old man, in great trouble of mind.

"No matter. You can raise it. Judge 'll lend it to you. Old friends, you know. Won't you, Judge?"

This audaciously cool request, on the part of the prisoner, raised a laugh among the dozen or twenty spectators, and tended to make everybody good-natured, as Osk no doubt meant it should, only the old gran'sir failing to see any fun in his grandson's impertinence.

Even the judge had to smile, as he remarked, "That would be an unheard-of arrangement—for the court to impose a fine and then proceed to pay it!"

"If I could only believe this was the last of his tricks!" the agitated old man muttered.

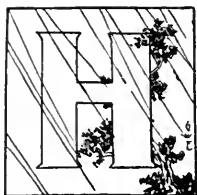
“It’s the very last, I promise you,” Osk protested. “Get me out of this little scrape, and I’ll be a credit to you after this.”

“I don’t know,” Gran’sir Pudgwick replied, in a plaintive murmur. “I’ve got a little money to home, and if the judge’ll give me ten minutes—”

A gleam of triumph lighted Osk’s face. At that moment an eager-eyed youth pressed forward into the court-room.

CHAPTER XXXII

"HIS 'BETTERMOST' COAT"



HALF an hour earlier, while Gideon was giving his testimony, a yellow envelope had been brought in by a messenger and handed to Fred Melverton. Absorbed in the proceedings of the trial, he gave a hasty glance at the message, and then handed it to Canton Quimby.

"But don't you see?" his friend whispered. "This may be important. When we went through his room we saw nothing of the kind. I should have noticed it."

"I think I should, too," Melverton replied. "You may be right. It may lead to something. I believe I'll jump on my wheel and skip over—'t won't take long."

"No, no! You stay here. You may be needed. I'll go, or—there's your friend!" And Quimby beckoned to Tracy Lisle, who stood among the

spectators, watching the young men in consultation over the yellow missive.

“Look here, Trace,” said Melverton, showing him the despatch. “Do you remember seeing anything of the sort?”

“N-o-o!” Tracy murmured, glancing his eye wonderingly over the paper.

“Suppose you take my wheel at the door—or Quimby’s; you could n’t ride mine,” Melverton said; “spin over to the house, see if you can find out what this means, and be back here again—”

“‘Ere the leviathan can swim a league,” quoted Canton Quimby.

Tracy went, and he had now returned. Flushed and panting he quickly made his way to his friends, cap in hand, and carrying a coat on his arm.

“Find anything of it?” Fred anxiously demanded.

“No,” Tracy whispered excitedly; “and I did n’t believe I should. There was only a crumpled handkerchief lying on the table in his room.”

“We ’re getting a clue,” said Quimby, looking up keenly at Osk Ordway, who was regarding the coat on Tracy’s arm with a strangely intense and anxious expression.

“But I ’ve got it!” Tracy whispered gleefully.

"The clue?" asked Quimby.

"The thing itself," said Tracy.

And he whispered a rapid explanation into the ears of his astonished friends.

"One moment, Mr. Pudgwick! Don't go just yet," said Fred. The old gran'sir, after a consultation with the judge, was setting off to bring his money with which to pay the fine he had before so firmly resolved not to pay. "I've a few words to say to his honor," Melverton went on, rising to his feet, "which I prefer that you should hear. If his honor will permit."

"Go on," said Judge Carter, while all listened intently.

"I should like to explain," the young man resumed, "that it was a search on our part for very different and much more valuable plunder that led to the discovery of the bird's nest in Oscar's possession. A certain prize cup had been taken from my mother's house about the time when he had access to it, and I frankly confess that I suspected him of appropriating it. I now as frankly own that I was mistaken, and I beg his pardon."

Oscar, who had been making signs for Tracy to give him the coat, answered Fred's acknowledgment with a glassy smile, as if by no means at ease in his mind in regard to the situation.

"Still," Melverton proceeded, "I thought it probable some other object might have been taken—a suspicion that could n't be readily verified in a hurried survey of the premises. But since I have been sitting here, a telegram has been handed me, from my brother Frank,"—he extended the despatch to the judge,—“who, as your honor will perceive, asks me to bring away—what he mentions—from the table in his room.”

Meanwhile Canton Quimby sat watching, with calm intensity, the changes in Osk's countenance, and he now secured what he had so ardently desired—a glimpse into that wily deceiver's momentarily unmasked soul. Fred continued:

"I immediately sent my friend, Tracy Lisle, who has charge of the house, to look for what should have been on my brother's table, and he reports that it was n't to be found. By a singular coincidence, however,—” He interrupted himself, and added: “Will your honor allow him to make a statement?”

“The court sees no objection,” the judge replied. “What is it, Tracy?”

With his blue eyes sparkling, and his ruddy features glowing, Master Lisle stepped forward, and told his story.

“I went on a bicycle, and as I was passing Ma-

ple street, old Mrs. Pudgwick ran out to ask me how the trial was going. I could n't wait, but she seemed so troubled, I said I would tell her when I came along back. I had forgotten all about it, when, as I was nearing Maple street again, I saw her running up from her house, beckoning and calling; and I had to stop. She had this coat"—Tracy held it up for all to look at—"and when I said there was n't much to tell, and was starting on again, she caught hold of me.

"‘Do, please, take him this,’ she said, ‘so he ’ll have something decent to put on. It’s his “better-most” coat. His gran’sir was going to carry it to him,’ she told me; ‘but I could n't find it when he started off; I’ve had the greatest hunt! What the boy wanted to tuck it away out o’ sight so for, I can’t imagine!’

"‘All right; I ’ll give it to him,’ I said; but as she was handing it to me, she noticed something heavy in one of the pockets, which she had been in too great a hurry to give any thought to before. It thumped against the handle-bar like this."

Tracy swung the loaded pocket against the judge's table with a muffled thud, as he added:

"I started to take it out for her. She saw it, and was ever so much astonished. Then I said,



"THE THING IN THE POCKET WAS THIS," SAID FRED, HOLDING IT UP."



'Never mind!' flung the coat over my arm, and here it is!"

It was now Melverton's turn to resume his explanation.

"The thing in the pocket is this,—” holding it up before the eyes of judge, prisoner, and spectators,—“my brother Frank's revolver. He meant to carry it with him to the seaside, but must have left it behind by accident, in the hurry of departure. He seems to remember placing it on his dressing-table, where it somehow got overlooked at the last moment. He now telegraphs for it, as there is to be target-shooting to-morrow. Your honor will notice what a curiously wrought and perfect weapon it is; and that it has my brother's initials on the butt-cap. How it passed from his dressing-table into Oscar Ordway's pocket, Oscar will perhaps explain.”

“I see now,” Chief Hazel observed, stepping up to examine the weapon, “why he objected so to his grandmother's getting his ‘bettermost’ coat when I took him from the house.”

Oscar attempted no explanations, but stood sullenly defiant; and when Tracy handed him the coat, with an angry stroke of his arm he flung it upon the floor. There it lay in the dust at his feet

until old man Pudgwick stooped with a groan to gather it up.

Judge Carter asked if Melverton wished to enter a complaint against Osk for the far more serious offense just brought to light.

"I don't see how I can well shirk that duty," Fred replied, "although it will be a very painful one. I trust I am not actuated by the slightest feeling of ill will. But I am convinced that it will be a good thing for the community, for his grandparents, and for Oscar himself, if he is placed in some reformatory institution, where he will acquire habits of industry and good behavior, which he will never do in his present surroundings. I think his grandfather will, upon reflection, agree with me."

"Mr. Melverton is right!" Mr. Pudgwick replied with strong emotion, mechanically brushing the dust from his grandson's "bettermost" coat. "And I guess his gram'er 'll be of the same way of thinking when she knows."

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHO KEPT THE CUP



THESE events happened so short a time ago that there is little more to tell. Oscar was in due course sent to the State Reformatory; where, I am pleased to learn, he is making an unexpectedly good record, showing what needed discipline can sometimes do in the case of a ne'er-do-well who fails to get his deserts at home.

His absence from the village has proved a blessing to the class of boys who were formerly under his influence; so much of ill in a whole community is often owing to the bad example of one or two reckless leaders. Gideon has gone to work; and George Oliver, no longer finding anything to ridicule in Tracy Lisle's "aristocratic ways," is trying, like him, honestly and truly to "make the best of himself."

In his letters to his grandparents Oscar makes

no hypocritical pretenses of penitence or affection, but he sometimes alludes to the comforts of home in a way that shows how much better he appreciates the privileges and blessings of which he is temporarily deprived than he ever did when in the enjoyment of them.

“How I’d like to walk in and sit down in the corner with you both this evening!” Or, “If I only had some of grandmother’s good”—this or that,—meaning the dishes she used to prepare for him with such loving pains, often to receive only cross words and scowling looks in return.

The old people prize these letters more than they do anything else in the world; and find in their grandson the solace of their lives, now that he is separated from them.

As for Midget, who is the real hero of this story, if it has a hero, he is making extraordinary progress in the line of education his mother fortunately hit upon, after so many disappointments. The word *cup* proved the key that was to open a new world to his childish mind. When it was shown to him in print, he realized for the first time that the alphabet signified speech, and became interested in what had failed to fix his attention before. Simultaneously with the printed alpha-

bet he learned the sign-alphabet of the deaf-mutes; and each newly-acquired name of a thing became fixed in his memory, associated with its three different forms of expression: the spoken word, the written or printed letters, and the finger movements by which the same sounds were represented.

The various steps in his progress would form an interesting story; but we have no place for it here. Now in his eighth year he can pronounce a great many common words, and read many more from familiar lips (the speech of strangers giving him much greater difficulty); further than this, he can read and write as well as many boys of his age who can hear and who have enjoyed the advantage of school instruction. He has been taught wholly at home, and his mother and Ida will probably continue his teachers for some time yet, although Fred Melverton claims the privilege of defraying his expenses at the famous Northampton school.

Fred would never allow the Prize Cup to be returned to the Melverton home. It is so curiously associated with a most interesting incident in the child's life, that the owner has had the inscription on it filled out in a different way from what was originally intended; so that, after the date of the race, it reads:

" Won by Frederick Melverton, and by him presented to his dear young friend, Laurie Lisle."

It stands on a mantel in the old parsonage; and the last time I saw it there, the little nest of fine hay, which had been removed only that the engraving might be completed, again showed, soft and brown, against the golden lining.

The phoebes never knew how kind the child meant to be to them. But they have returned to the old bridge, and have a new nest of their own this spring.







**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET**

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

PS
3097
P75
1896
C.1
ROBA

